"—— & Co."

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JEAN-RICHARD BLOCH

"——— & Co."

Translated by
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INTRODUCTION
by ROMAIN ROLLAND

INTRODUCTION

I AM NOT ACCUSTOMED TO WRITING PREFACES FOR BOOKS, EVEN for those by my friends. I do so only when the work affects me deeply ; then from the moment it enters the lists, I am glad to become its herald—indeed, even to break a lance for it, should the occasion demand it, as it does in the present instance.

I had already read Jean-Richard Bloch's "— *& Co.*" in manuscript before the war. I reread it in its first imperfect edition, published at the end of the war. I have just finished reading it again in the definitive edition—each time receiving the same impact of creative power. Each time it recalled to me the genius of Balzac. I make bold to say, without any reservations, that here is the only French novel I know which is worthy to take its place among the masterpieces of the *Human Comedy*. It is in the same tradition.

The coupling of these names would be perilous to any other man, but the personality of Jean-Richard Bloch is quite capable of standing the comparison. Nor is it called forth merely by the choice of subject, that is to say, the world of affairs and the astonishing mixture of impassioned idealism with the most meticulous practical spirit which characterises the immortal author of *César Birotteau*. No, the analogy is rooted in the essential art of the book, in the prodigious *density* of its material.

The great majority of novelists write from a shallow inkwell. They but scratch the surface of reality. They seize upon nature from a single angle, perhaps by means of external description, or through the minds of the characters, or through use of movement or emotion. I know scarcely a

single writer who, throughout a work of any size, comes to grips with life like an athlete, hand to hand,—who embraces the entire mass of reality, his chosen prey, in the net of his spiritual and intellectual perception.

Yet this is the very achievement of "— *& Co.*" The tribe of the Simlers is modelled from human flesh. We can see them, touch them, watch them breathe ; we can even carry away the living clay in our hands.

For me, that is the first and indelible impression produced by this great book—even beyond the overwhelming interest of the story itself : an exceptional power of *integral* creation, of body plus soul. The verb " to create " here takes on its full complement of meanings. The author has not only imagined or observed his characters. *He has engendered them.*

His subject is a complex one. Two or three fundamental problems are interwoven. There is the problem of the Company swallowing the Man. There is the racial problem of the Jew implanted in an alien soil.

The author dismisses his work too lightly. In a short comment he has written on his book, he discusses these problems as " ideologies." He will permit me to differ with him on this point. This " ideology " is a social reality of a twofold significance. It poses questions of life and death. We cannot allow ourselves the æsthetic luxury of dismissing it too peremptorily.

Whether or not modern man will be devoured by the infernal mechanical organisation he has founded—here is a tragedy which strikes us much more forcibly than that of the Atrides, for we must endure the effects of it. Nor do we submit to it cheerfully. And the answer given to our anxiety by "— *& Co.*" is by no means reassuring. We see these hardy human forces presented to us at the beginning, like white-hot forged iron in which resistance and malleability are balanced, and within thirty years, these same

forces are oxidised, their wheels corroded, choked with grease left by the daily friction, by the daily repetition of the labour of ants, the slow contagion of the strange surroundings, with its anæmia-breeding atmosphere, its routine, its apathy. Their spirit is broken. The Simlers have conquered Vendeuvre. They have become—neutralised.

One only among these men, out of some dull vital impulse, devoid of rational volition, attempts—for a day, for an hour—to escape from the wheel of Destiny, from the Company which is dragging him away from his own race through a marriage of love. But the psychology of the herd, stronger among Jews than among other men, decrees that he halt at the first sign of opposition from the family, and that he take his place again at the chain, irrevocably defeated.

It is understood that salvation, both as conceived in the author's mind and in the final utterances of Ben Stern, the Simler from beyond the seas, is only for the intransigents, the apostates who flee through a side door. Escape is the only refuge ; but it is a fatal refuge. Because among the Israelites, the more the pressure of the environment becomes all-embracing and suffocating, the more irresistible grows the nostalgia for flight. In the homes of old bourgeois families from the provinces, I was once very well acquainted with these " caravan " dreams, visions of the vagrant rootless gypsy life. But the dream generally found its satisfaction in having been born ; and after having cherished it a while, the visionaries would once more turn quite tranquilly to " cultivate their garden." But among the Israelites, escape takes the form of a violent outburst ; and in these periodic flights they swarm all over the earth.

However fully and vigorously the author has treated the problem of the relationship between the individual and the group, between man and society, I find that he has halted at the threshold of the second problem : the relation of the conquering Jew to the race which in turn conquers him.

The problem is complex and thorny, changing its form with each country. North and South, in the Orient and in the Occident, ethnic factors vary : any contact with Israel gives rise to strongly diversified chemical reactions. Jean-Richard Bloch has taken the most heterogeneous substances from two races and brought them together : a family of Alsatian Jews and a little French community in the west of France. But he does not supply us with the means of discussing the advisability or the value of this mixture, for the Simler family haughtily declines to be drawn into the melting-pot. We cannot draw any valid conclusions from the few slender contacts which they have with the native inhabitants. I might add that the atmosphere and milieu of western France are seen in this book only from the outside. They are painted in two strangely juxtaposed colours : idealisation and disdain. I do not believe that the picture takes into account the permanency and durability of the life of this fellow race whose sleep is only the periodic relapse of an age-old system.

But however important may be the place assigned to Mlle. Le Pleynier, that engaging figure (in my opinion, the only one which is idealised throughout the book) is especially important in connection with the crisis produced by her contact with Joseph Simler, and which, after a seeming rebellion, determines the conclusive subjection of the latter to the solid mass of the family and the Company.

The outstanding and preëminent element in this book is obviously the Simler family. And in painting their portraits, the author is incomparable. His treatment, his style, by emphasising certain qualities, by making them stand out in monumental relief, by the abundance of the clay and the vigorous joy of the modeller who shapes it, borders very closely on caricature, yet is majestic to the point of being epic. He reminds me of Daumier. There is the same firm touch, the well-rounded flesh and muscles, the michelangelesque ardour in the bourgeois buffoonery, the *vis comica* (*tragica ?*),

the irresistible scenic movement, the genius not only of the individual portraiture (Hippolyte Simler is a world in himself!), but of the *ensembles*. In this novelist there lurks a dramatic demon which since the writing of "— *& Co.*" has sought the theatre for self-expression. Immediately following his début as a novelist, he showed his theatrical claws in the magnificent dialogue scenes of "— *& Co.*," and very little alteration would be required (as is also true of Balzac) to transplant them on to the stage. Here is supreme comedy in which lively buffoonery and tragic emotion are both manipulated by a master. Need I cite that magnificent scene of the family council at the Alsatian fireside, waiting to welcome the return of the two Simler sons after the purchase of the factory,—or the inventory scene,—or Hippolyte's agony, depicted in that astonishing style which intertwines the pathetic and the burlesque, conveying nothing short of an epic inspiration?

No matter how summary and imperfect this necessarily rapid estimate of the novel may be, I hope that it at least permits the reader to visualise its amplitude and its solid construction.

Nevertheless, this *Introduction* would betray him if it were to omit the fact that the author of "— *& Co.*" cannot possibly be confined within the limits of this one work, which reveals but a single side of his genius. Every book that he has since published reveals him in a different light. One could say that, similar to those periodic revolts which are so much an integral part of "— *& Co.*," he too perpetually rebels against the form and style which he has just expressed.

To the massive structure, the heavy layers of paint, the superabundant, compact realism endowed with flesh and brilliant colourings of "— *& Co.*" (which is so much a part of certain Flemish works) there is opposed the clear, glowing atmosphere, the sharp lines, the proud contours, the incisive phrase vibrating like a slender rapier, the flame and

light of that other masterpiece : *La Nuit Kurde*, a story perhaps suggested by the *Nouvelles Asiatiques* of Gobineau, who would assuredly not recognise himself in the fire of passion that he has inspired. *Sur un Cargo* and *Locomotives*, both of which bear the subtitle of " Travels," give a vivid picture of the nomad escaping from civilisation, regaining possession of the world with new eyes, never at home save in the great outside world, fraternising effortlessly with the passersby whose paths cross his own for a brief instant, electing a native land in some groaning tender. And at the same time two spiritual confessions and two investigations of the present moment are revealed, conducted with lucidity and a joy of discovery, as if earth and water were being born anew with every passing moment. Besides all this, not to mention *Lévy*, a book rather in the vein of "— *& Co.*," and *Carnaval est mort*, scintillating paradoxical essays, " toward the better comprehension of my time," this devil of a man would not deny himself the luxury of a poetic comedy, exciting and ironic, much in the style of Musset in his hours of Shakespearian fantasy : *Dix Filles dans un pré.*

And as yet we are still at the beginning of the journey ! Jean-Richard Bloch has barely passed his fortieth year, and he is emerging from the furnace of the war. The war, which scarred his body with three wounds, has instilled a world of tragic experiences and emancipating disillusions into his spirit. It is this world which still smoulders in a brain wherein a fever of creation and universal curiosity rages. Some day he will begin. I await the decisive picture of our era from this poet.

What is there to add ? That I have known and loved him as a brother for fifteen years ; that these stormy fifteen years which have been the touchstone of souls and of friendships, have only served to consecrate our mutual faith ; that within this virile artist who thinks as he writes, and who acts as he thinks, there is a character which is the

equal of his art ; and that no figure of our own age has realised as ably as he has that harmony of the proud virtues of art and intelligence of those two ancient but always renascent peoples, of those spiritual aristocracies, the Orient and the Occident—France and Israel.

ROMAIN ROLLAND.

Villeneuve, April 8, 1926.

PART I: 1871

I

THREE MEN EMERGED FROM THE DESERTED BUILDING, AND took a final turn round it. A big man, wearing a bowler hat and trinkets upon his watch-chain which rattled against his stomach, stopped at one of the corners. He indicated in succession the four cardinal points. His black finger-nails connected the factory with the national traffic system : ten minutes to the wharf, twelve to the railway, seven to the post office, a quarter of an hour to the Chamber of Commerce.

While this guide to the four winds of industry issued from between his cheeks, the other two men exchanged anxious glances. Their attention was drawn to the cracks in the wall, where the cement had fallen out.

One of them had his trousers turned up over his boots. The dust of two days reached to his knees. Round his neck, a grey scarf took the place of a collar. The coal-dust of a night in the train still darkened his eyelids and accentuated the wrinkles on his face. He was small and thin and betrayed a nervous agitation in his hands.

His companion, who was stout without being any taller, looked at him through his spectacles without seeing him. His lips betrayed the rapidity of the calculations in which he was absorbed. At one moment, with the tips of his fingers, he would pull away from the wall a patch of yellow moss. After which, he would push back his cheap straw hat and mop his scalp.

They completed, in the agent's wake, their tour of the building, and found themselves at the rusty iron gate. The

stifling heat of a thundery morning had baked the clinkers on the path and scorched their feet through the thin soles of their boots.

The little man pointed his chin towards the end of the street. Between the ceiling of leaden sky and the dull reverberation of the ground, it was already dark at ten o'clock in the morning. The glitter of the whitewashed house fronts devoured his eyelids. A day and a night in the train, six months of insomnia and calculation were revealed, that morning, by rings of inflammation round his eyes and two thumbs pressed against his temples.

" What sort of neighbours would there be, here ? "

The agent broke out in a panegyric of the neighbourhood. A few yards farther on, to the right, Morindet & Co., the well-known shirt factory. The other long brick wall, crowned with dusty vegetation, represented the back of Lorilleux-Pommier & Co.'s weaving-mill. Farther on, to the left, a porch of white masonry suggested the millions of Sabouret and Son's combing-mill. The chimney that was vomiting smoke, and rose above the roof-tops, indicated the farthest outpost of Chevalier-Lefombère.

These names fell from his lips with the ring of golden coins. Clouds of smoke invaded the sky, driven by a warm breeze from the east ; he pointed towards the clouds, his fingers loaded with pinchbeck rings :

" Here you are in the heart of the business world. To make money, you must begin by coming to a place where money is made."

A glance cast by the stout stranger at the knees of his tweed trousers did not inspire him with a proper appreciation of this aphorism. He turned to the gate, and opened it again. It yielded with a prolonged wail.

" I have not shown you the porter's lodge."

He pushed open a wooden door, and took them into a one-storeyed building. The floor was tiled. The windows let in

light, heat and dust partly from the street, partly from the reddish clinkers of the courtyard.

The agent raised the lid of a sort of hole, from which rose a whiff of damp air ; he proclaimed :

" The cellar ! "

A corkscrew stairway led to the upper floor. A sort of attic, which was reached by a ladder, alone sheltered the upper rooms from cold or heat. The wall-paper hanging in strips, the warped woodwork, the broken windowpanes, a bat's nest on the upper floor, pigeons' dung everywhere, formed the furniture of the house.

" Two rooms and an office on the first floor ; office, living-room, kitchen on the ground floor ; water and gas. A porter with no family can live here like a king."

A sort of flash passed between the two strangers ; they stood for a moment gazing into one another's eyes. Instead of a porter with no family, this cottage was destined to lodge, should the need arise, their father and mother, one of the sons with his wife and two children, and the other, for the present a bachelor.

The agent turned towards them to indicate that the inspection was, in his opinion, finished.

" Indeed ! " said the thinner of the two, in a harsh tone. And their gaze was abruptly severed, leaving a curious amusement in the trace of a smile upon their lips.

They set off with bowed shoulders, without another word, along the avenues through which streamed the heat of the summer morning.

The shield of smoke had spread over the town. The side-streets opened sluices of silence upon the prevailing din. At certain moments, the throb of the looms beat time to those heavy sounds ; a few yards farther on the hum of the fulling-mills drowned it. A spinning-mill shook the five storeys of a factory with its thunder of artillery. A cast-iron sewer suddenly heated the pavement of the side-walk ; it disgorged

into the gutters a soapy stream, in which a row of poor women were dipping their soiled rags.

An employer's mansion, flanked by outbuildings, capari-soned with balconies, carved out here and there in the thick of the tumult an area of silence. Through the railings, the strangers could see, as they passed, the shaven lawn which ended in a curve before the steps. The tall windows of the winter-garden shed upon the palm-trees a glaze of good breeding. The curtains hung without a fold ; they allowed one to imagine the glass pendants of a lustre and the arm of a bronze David lurking in the interior of a drawing-room.

In the open doorway of the coach-house, beyond the path of raked gravel, a groom, bare-armed, was sluicing the flaw-less varnish of a brougham. The corner of the big house only half concealed a long alley of limes. A porter, in a royal blue coat, came out of his lodge ; he cast at the wayfarers a glance which rose from their boots to their hats, and, having estimated the value of each of these garments, turned away. When they had taken thirty paces the escort of clamorous factories closed round them again. And so they walked on for many minutes, with aching feet and agonised hearts.

The agent walked ahead, to show his discretion, and distributed important greetings as he went. He turned round now and again, and attached to the factories the labels of the firms that owned them. The figures of their illustrious balance-sheets anointed these names with the oil of millions.

The two men advanced shoulder to shoulder. They lowered their heads without uttering a word, because what was at stake was nothing less than their daily bread, the work of their hands, and the devouring thirst of their ambition.

Finally, one of them, the bigger of the two, said :

" Upon my word, the street is paved with gold."

The other made some reply, without raising either his voice or his head.

They passed by a private house. The name uttered by the agent brought them to a halt.

" That is a man who came from Bitche, fifty years ago, as we are coming from Buschendorf. See where his widow lived, Joseph."

The thin stranger chewed the words as a dog snatches its food.

" In fifty years' time, will Hermine be living in a house like that ? "

His big companion flung his head back to examine the house through his spectacles. He did not smile ; it was not the time for smiles.

" In fifty years, Guillaume . . . ? "

He turned his eyes again to the house with its eight windows abreast, the central block of which was crowned with a high, four-square slate roof.

The official agent had joined them. He drew the gentlemen's attention to the peculiar fact that all the chimneys which could be seen from where they were standing vomited their smoke to the profit of the widow or of her dynasty.

The spectacled stranger turned once again to the thin one, laid his hand on his shoulder :

" The time has come to take our factory."

They proceeded on their way, but this time with the elastic, loping pace of wolves in pursuit of their prey, of which one would not have thought them capable. In the tangled skein of the trails which they had been following all that morning, all of which had led to success, they had at length discerned a guiding line. They had set their feet on the spot where one of those trails had started.

" What Schermann has done, the two Simlers can do," growled the big one. They had left the trails of other men and were beginning to trace a line of their own.

II

A LEATHER-COVERED DOOR CLOSED HEAVILY BEHIND THEM AND imprisoned them in a kind of tunnel. If we except the sickly-looking clerk visible from the passage through the panes of a glazed door, at the end of a sort of cellar, the place filled with a sweetish odour to which their trail had led them first of all, contained absolutely no one but the agent and their two selves.

The door was of double thickness and reinforced ; the two windows were fitted with panes of ground glass and guarded by stout bars. This abundance of reinforcements and bars made one suppose everything that the agent wished the public to suppose.

When there was nothing within earshot of the trio but those windows, those bars, that door, the green files of papers, and that other thing of which they were thinking but which they refrained from mentioning, the two strangers exchanged another glance. It shot across the room like a hawser flung from one vessel to another, at sea. Then they moistened their lips with their tongues, and waited together for the third man to let them hear the sound of his voice.

The agent turned his back to them. He had just found the right file. He extracted from it, with a sigh, a roll of tracing-paper, which he spread out upon the table with the polite resignation of a public official. He would have offered with the same indifference India tea, neckties at one franc, or mechanical pianos. It was his routine. Facing him were two individuals prepared to stake their whole existence. The violence of his sigh had burst the fastening of his collar ; one saw a livid Adam's apple dancing up and down after his recent effort, as a fisherman's float bobs up and down after a tug at the hook. Joseph smiled.

" It seems to me that we cannot do better than proceed methodically and return to the details of an enumeration

which . . . The premises that you have just inspected . . ." the agent began in a toneless voice. The thin man thereupon thrust forward his right hand, as though he would make a clean sweep of everything on the table.

" What do we need these things for any more ? "

" Oh, Wilhelm, the plans ! "

His companion had flung himself upon the drawings, the whole weight of his body supported upon the palms of his hands. His spectacles slipped from his nose, and fell upon the table, their stems in the air.

" Sir ! " The agent had turned crimson. The plans were his flesh and blood. He clung to them as to the proof of a noble calling. He had engraved upon his cards : *Expert Engineer.*

" What do you want those papers for, Joseph ? Don't you know that factory by now as well as if you had built it yourself ? "

" In the event of any dispute as to the buildings, Sir, or as to the land, these plans are evidence . . . "

Joseph replaced his spectacles, took a footrule from his pocket and coolly cut the expert short :

" Leave me alone, Wilhelm. Talk to this gentleman. I am listening to you both."

He bent over the plans. The other twitched his hands in his nervous way and shrugged his shoulders. He began with a stammer, because he was recovering command of himself, and without looking, at first, at the man whom he was addressing : " Have you nothing *better* to show us ? "

" I have let you see all the premises that are vacant at present in Vendeuvre."

" Humph ! They're in fine condition ! "

The agent took shelter, with a wave of his hand, behind the decrees of Providence.

" Would you rather I showed you the plans of the little Le Pleynier factory, up the blind alley ? "

Without raising his head, Joseph made a motion with his

fingers which sent this suggestion in the wake of many others, behind the wall of files. The agent bowed ; his hour had come ; he awaited in patience the inevitable question that would bring them on to his territory. As it happened, his two adversaries were in no mood to keep him languishing.

" What price ? " barked Wilhelm.

" What price ? Good gracious, I shall have to refer the matter to the owner."

" Refer the matter ? Indeed ? You undertake to let premises without finding out what price is being asked for them ? "

" Excuse me, gentlemen, I do not say that. But you must not suppose that these affairs are always so simple."

" Always, Monsieur Gabard ! " Joseph asserted, looking at him over his spectacles.

M. Gabard smiled a fixed smile : " Why, of course. We agents could wish for nothing better. What is our object ? It is to . . . "

" Pardon me," put in the milder voice of Joseph Simler. " Our object, on our side, is to proceed as rapidly as possible. Consequently, Sir, if it was dependent upon your kindness . . . ? "

Gabard heaved a sympathetic sigh : " Of course, of course. Let us come straight to the point. The factory which you have just inspected belonged to the grandfather of the present owners. He managed it himself—but that scarcely concerns you, I suppose . . . "

He plunged deftly into his file : " Let us say, then . . . here it is . . . I come down to, to, to . . . 1836."

" 1836 ? "

Joseph endeavoured too late to suppress his brother's untimely exclamation. It had already furnished the agent with a pretext for the digression he had been longing to make:

" When I say 1836 . . . it dates *actually* from 1807, having been founded by Monsieur Poncet the great-grandfather, during the International Blockade. He did good business

there—it is a building that carries good luck with it, gentlemen !—But having died fairly soon afterwards . . . "

Joseph stood erect and laid down his footrule : " Sir, my brother has asked you a question. We are no longer children. I do not know what your time is worth, but ours has a value beyond all comparison with the interest of the story that you are telling us. Monsieur Gabard, at what rent has the proprietor instructed you to lease the factory which we have just been inspecting ? "

" Eh, gentlemen, the proprietor, where is he ? Who has the right to fix a price ? Gentlemen, do not be angry with me, but since you are no longer novices in business, you must have heard of what is called the tutelage of minors, the *curator ad ventrem*, the . . . Ah ! Gentlemen, I wish I were able to answer your question and say : The rent is so much, there ! But, but, but, ah ! "

Then, taking advantage of the slight confusion which he had produced in the enemy's ranks, he went on, with his gentle placidity :

" In 1836 died Monsieur Frédéric Poncet, himself the son of . . . but let us go on ; he left two sons of full age, who divided his personal estate, and formed a partnership for carrying on the business. I refer now to Messieurs Firmin and Alexis Poncet. On the 11th of September, 1858, Monsieur Alexis died, leaving three minor children, two of them being girls, and expressing the wish that his son, the young Norbert-Elesban, then aged seven years, should succeed him in due course as the partner of his uncle, Monsieur Firmin. You follow me ? But the young Norbert-Elesban happening to die himself, before reaching his majority, in consequence of a boating accident which cost him his life at the same time as that of his mother, Monsieur Firmin was appointed guardian to the two surviving sisters. Six years later, Monsieur Firmin, who was considerably junior to his elder brother, Monsieur Alexis, and had remained a bachelor,

fell in love with the younger of his wards, Mademoiselle, Mademoiselle, Mademoiselle—oh, dear ! Elisabeth-Athénais-Juliette, and married her, on the 17th of March, 1869, he himself being aged 46 years, and the young lady 17. As ill-luck would have it, Monsieur Firmin Poncet abandoned his home and the management of his business to perform his duty to his country, was appointed captain in the Departmental Militia, and was killed, at the close of the year '70, at the battle of Orléans, leaving his unfortunate widow two months gone in pregnancy. You see the point ? Of course, nothing could be more plain. A *curator ad ventrem* was appointed, as the law directs, who is, as a matter of fact, the President of the Civil Tribunal. But, a year earlier, Mademoiselle Marguerite-Antonine-Félicie-Odette-Anne-Marie Poncet, elder sister to the former Mademoiselle, presently Madame Elisabeth-Athénais-Juliette Poncet, had married Monsieur Taffoneau des Lauriers ; she died on the 7th of April, 1870, after giving birth to the infant Urbain-Félix-Alexis Taffoneau des Lauriers. I ought to add," said the agent, in a hollow tone, " that the friendly relations between the Demoiselles Poncet had not survived the marriage of the younger with her uncle, a circumstance which has rendered impossible any attempt at a settlement between this lady on the one hand and her brother-in-law on the other, and has made necessary the judicial liquidation of so complicated a succession."

The two Simlers had listened to this narrative with an expression in which anger finally prevailed :

" But surely, Sir, there must be some legal tutor, a liquidator, a magistrate of some sort who is entrusted with this succession ? "

" Gentlemen, there is indeed."

" Ah ! "

" There was indeed, I should have said."

" What ? Is he dead too, then ? "

" Thank heaven, no, but he was a man scarcely fitted to deal with these industrial matters, and . . . "

" And ? "

" He resigned his office, a week ago."

It was at this moment that the Simlers understood their man, the West, its cunning, the pitfalls that are covered by so much indolence and good nature. They exchanged a quick glance and Joseph turned crimson. His voice became all the calmer. It was now the agent's fault if he noticed nothing.

" Monsieur Gabard, you are making fools of us. I forgive you, since it is by these practices that you earn your livelihood. But as we are obliged to earn our own, we shall bid you a humble farewell. If, before we reach that door, you have not given us an answer as to the price—there is the train at midday. My dear Sir, I bid you good day."

He took three steps, Guillaume two.

" Eh, gentlemen, fix it for yourselves, your price ! "

They stopped short, Joseph came back to the table, laid down his straw hat upon it, and took up the footrule which he had forgotten.

" Ten thousand, Sir ! " he said with a rasping quiver in his voice.

Thereupon an innocent surprise caused the honest man's eyebrows to rise. He gazed at each of them in turn, lowered his eyes to the trinkets upon his watch-chain, raised them again at length to the two men, and a smile of indulgent fatherhood played about his swollen lips : " Ten thousand francs gentlemen ? But this factory is not to let,—it is for sa-ale."

" For sale ? "

There was no possibility of misunderstanding the cry that escaped from the brothers. For the first time that morning the man felt that he was playing another game than that of the ceremonial preliminaries.

Joseph was by now standing in front of him, having come round the table. Gabard saw his spectacles gleam within eight inches of his own eyes, and felt the warmth of his breath upon his cheeks :

" I think that it is better to end this discussion . . . We are not accustomed . . . A whole morning you have been dragging us about . . . And yet you knew what we wanted ! You cannot say that we did not explain. You are lying, aren't you ? "

" Gentlemen ! "

The big man found his line of retreat barred by his armchair.

" I want no more *gentlemen* ! "

" I swear to you. I have received the order to sell. Do you wish to see it ? "

" Whose order ? There is no longer any liquidator ! "

" But he remains in office until he has appointed his successor . . . oh ! "

Joseph had laid his two heavy paws on the man's shoulders.

" Look us in the eyes, Monsieur Gabard. We are not the sort of people that you think us. There has been a misunderstanding. Your trade is cheating, ours is manufacturing, because that is our livelihood, and now we must have that factory. I do not give you so much as a minute to accept. It is ten thousand francs and a fifteen years' lease. You hear me ? "

" Sir," moaned Gabard, trying to turn his face to Guillaume, and stretching out his arm to the table. " Sir, look there, these papers, I am only an intermediary, I must se-ell."

Joseph gripped him by the shoulders and shook him.

" Then why all this play-acting ? Why . . . "

But he saw all of a sudden, within an inch of his spectacles, the livid glottis dancing up and down like a fisherman's

float ; he smiled again, released the man, and turned towards the table. Guillaume was already turning over the file. Gabard, sinking back in his armchair, tried to slip his hand towards the bell.

" Don't move hand or foot, I am warning you for your good," growled Joseph, with a significant gesture. The man took the two ends of his collar in his hands, and began to moan piteously.

Meanwhile the other two were turning over the papers in feverish haste.

" Certificate of marriage . . . death certificate . . . certificate . . . certificate . . . certificate . . . deed of adjudication . . . certificate . . . letter of 7th January, 1861 . . . letter . . . certificate . . . procuration—humph—nothing. If it is not here, my dear Sir, if it is not here . . . "

" Dated the 20th of March, this year, oh ! a letter from the liquidator, oh ! paper with the heading, oh ! of the civil tribunal, it, oh ! it is there."

" I hope so for your sake," said Joseph coldly. Guillaume exclaimed : " *Here it is!* " and they both bent over the letter, cheek by jowl, Joseph keeping motionless behind his back, with his right hand, the man in the armchair.

They read in silence, read again, and the paper rattled faintly against Guillaume's fingertips. When he had laid it down, the two Alsatians stood upright and withdrew from either side of the table. Their faces were aflame, and they remained silent, refraining from glancing at each other.

" You . . . you have seen it ? "

" Yes."

There could be no mistaking the terms of the letter. The law was explicit and ordered a sale.

" You have a copy of the Code ? " asked Joseph. " Good. Do not move."

He followed the line of the big man's trembling finger, took a volume from the open bookcase and turned the pages.

Guillaume chewed his moustache. Joseph shut the book and flung it upon the table.

" That is all right."

He raised his eyes towards Guillaume and found a glance that was awaiting his own. He saw in it no doubt all that he hoped and feared to see, for his breath seemed to fail him, and he raised his hands to his collar, copying the agent's gesture.

One could discern from the traces on the boots of the two men more than one day spent in travelling, and, on their faces, an air of exhausted covetousness. They must have been scouring France for weeks without having found anything, and must be at their last gasp. As for the motive which had made them emerge from Alsace, as wolves emerge from a forest, the agent omitted to inquire, and this was his second mistake.

" That is all right," Joseph growled again. He scanned his brother's face with a sort of bewilderment. His brother spoke in turn, raising his hand to his chest, to the level of his inside pocket :

" Our father, Monsieur Simler, Hippolyte Simler, cloth weaver at Buschendorf, Haut-Rhin, has given us authority . . . "

(His voice failed at the too precise memory of the power of attorney : " I grant and confer, by this present act, full power to my sons Guillaume and Joseph Simler, both being of full age, to conclude and sign in my name all deeds, contracts, treaties and stipulations with respect to the lease of a factory. . . . " The word *lease* does not cover *purchase*.)

" —authority, legalised before the mayor of Buschendorf, on the 7th of June, 1871, to . . . *act* in his name. You are a dishonest man, Monsieur Gabard, to have made us visit that factory when you knew that it was not to let. What price . . . is asked for it ? "

Joseph's glance raced from the agent to Guillaume and

from Guillaume to the agent. The latter bent over the table without ceasing to gaze piteously at the two Simlers, and began in his turn to fumble among the disorder of the file.

" Do you wish to see the liquidator's letter ? It is—three hundred and fifty thousand."

A burst of laughter interrupted him : " Three hundred and fifty thousand ! " sneered Joseph who felt his head swimming.

" Gentlemen, I am only a humble agent . . . a mere interm—"

" Hold your tongue, then ! Three hundred and fifty thousand ? It's preposterous. Ha ha ! The shanty is falling to pieces. It is worth, it is worth ten thousand francs a year, two hundred thousand francs, cash down."

" Do you wish to see the letter ? I am a mere agent . . ."

" Hold your tongue, then ! You don't make fools of people like that. Why not double the price at once ? "

Guillaume reëntered the fray : " You have authority to deal, at least ? "

" Stop ! " Joseph cut him short. " The Code ! Where is the Code ? Ah, but ! . . . page, page . . . There has been a judicial liquidation, hasn't there ? *Then* there must have been a public auction, mustn't there ? There *must* have been a public auction ? Answer, you ! "

The agent raised a lifeless eye towards him : " Yes."

" *Pardi !* Give me those papers. Of course ! Here is the deed of adjudication. I had forgotten about it. Wilhelm, look at it ! "

Guillaume did not understand. Joseph was furiously turning over the bundle of stamped documents, bound in a Lyons paper with ribbons of an artistic hue.

" *Pardi ! Pardi !* Judgment delivered the . . . Ah ! Civil Tribunal of First Instance. What a fool I was ! Adjudication . . . listen : ' *Several candles were lighted, during the consumption of which no offer was made.*' . . . I thought as

much ! But it is the reserve price that I want to find . . . the reserve price . . . Ah ! Reserve price. . . . Listen, Wilhelm, do you know what was the reserve set on the shanty ? I thought so too. . . . Two hundred and seventy-five thousand, my boy, not a centime more, and, at that figure,nobody would look at it. We offer two hundred thousand, Gabard, my friend, cash down."

" Imp—"

" Two hundred thousand ! "

" But, gentlemen . . ."

" There is no *but* about it : two hundred thousand. You have your authority, we have ours, come over here and write."

The agent raised himself upon the arms of his chair : " I cannot ! "

" It is too late. You have lied to us three times. That was once too often."

" A contract extorted by force . . ."

" Am I forcing you ? " sneered Joseph, stepping back and spreading out his hands with an ingenuous air. " But, tell me : what is the agent's commission ? "

Gabard turned pale : " I don't understand."

" Lie number four. What is your commission, Monsieur Gabard ? "

" You know quite well."

" Tell us, all the same."

" T—t-wo per cent."

" Good ! " Here Joseph rubbed his hands and gave vent to so nervous a laugh that his brother turned to gaze at him with an air of alarm. " But I think I saw . . ."

Gabard instinctively covered the papers with his arms.

" Aha ? Now we understand, Master Gabard. A little letter. . . . You didn't remember that you had left it there, I expect ? "

" No ! It is a lie ! "

Joseph's voice rose a tone higher : " A letter from the liquidator, a little reply, which mentions, eh ?, something in the nature of a little bit extra ? People forget things. . . . Rash, when they have not a clear conscience ! "

Gabard's throat was beating a tattoo. Joseph advanced upon him, followed by Guillaume who was beginning to understand :

" I say two hundred thousand, cash down."

The agent replied in a cadaverous tone : " Two hundred thousand, plus the costs."

" Cash down."

The man, his face lowered, his hands flattened upon his papers, shook his head :

" I cannot, Monsieur Simler. Two hundred and ten thousand, that is my final word."

Joseph looked at the wretch, and realised that, this time, he had spoken the truth.

" Write," he murmured simply.

III

When they came out of the agent's office, the angle of the midday sun reduced their shadows to tiny pools at their feet. One of the pair was buttoned up to the throat and kept his arms glued to his body. The other, the stout one, was feeling the heat keenly.

He came to a halt on the very threshold of the house in which they had just been gambling, heads or tails, a portion of their destiny. He passed a finger between his collar and his throat. This caused his back collar-stud to snap. The man swore, then raised his eyes in which little flames of blood were dancing, and gazed for a moment at the leaden sky : " I ask myself how the sun manages to live in a sky like that, Guillaume." He broke out in an exaggerated laugh.

" Hey, Guillaume, what are you thinking about ? It is our sky, from to-day onwards, that black thing up there."

He brought his hand down with a thump on Guillaume's shoulder. But his laughter died away at the sight of the face that his companion turned towards him.

" For the love of God, Joseph, don't laugh like that."

And Guillaume pressed his arms more tightly than ever to his meagre chest :

" I keep asking myself what our father is going to say, and what will be the end of all this business. Come."

He began to walk away. A white blur appeared at that moment behind them, in the ground glass panes of the office window ; the agent was beginning to recover his spirits.

Joseph overtook his brother : " The devil take you. You have the agreement, I hope ? "

Guillaume stopped short. With a trembling hand, he unbuttoned his coat and drew out a stamped document from the inside pocket. He squinted at it for a moment, across his right cheek, and raised his eyes towards Joseph. Whereupon the latter smiled a fatherly smile, and laid his hand upon Guillaume's arm : " Don't lose it now. And don't worry any more than you need. You have your wife and kids. But I have never heard that where there is a pack of wool and a machine to weave it, any Simler has ever starved. I have never felt so hot. What time does the train go ? "

" Half-past six, if I remember right."

" It is twelve o'clock. Suppose we look for some shade ? "

His brother darted at him a yellowish eyeball in which an extraordinary flame of passion blazed. Before he had finished speaking, Joseph had, on his part, cast a hesitating glance at him. They exchanged no more words, but set out, with the same loping pace of hunting wolves, in a direction along which they knew that within six months every stone would have become familiar to them.

" Of what shall I be thinking, six months from now, when I pass by this wall ? " thought the thin one as he hopped over the gaping stones of the pavement.

" What will be in our minds, six months from now, when we pass this crossing ? " thought the stout one, as he stepped across a gutter along which a foul and scorching tide swirled.

The streets were empty. The factories were silent. A wagon loaded with coal passed across the avenue farther ahead, jolting as it crossed the gutter.

They passed by a tavern from which issued a splutter of frying food blended with the sound of voices. As they left the door behind them, the sound died away. There remained in the air only a very low sort of odour which finally passed under their tongues and made their mouths water.

They went straight ahead, casting violent glances on either side. They recognised the channel along which they would so often have to steer. The three chimneys of Chevalier Lefombère served as light-houses to this strange, unpiloted navigation.

The porter of the house that had been occupied by the widow, an immigrant fifty years ago from Bitche, was finishing his dinner. He was sipping a glass of old Calvados and gazing at the avenue through a pink Gloire de Dijon which decorated his window. He saw two dusty wayfarers stop outside the railings, gaze inside with gloomy eyes, then proceed upon their way. He never knew, in after years, that he had seen the two Simlers at the foot of their ladder, on the very day on which they began to climb.

At the corner of a side-street, Joseph halted. He pointed to a building.

" That must be the place, the Cercle du Commerce. A one-storeyed pavilion, with big windows, a garden behind railings at the end of a sort of square. Hey, Guillaume, that is where the big pots of the place meet. In six months' time the porter will be bowing to the ground before Monsieur

Simler senior, when he comes in quietly to read his *Temps*, on Sunday evenings. A different sort of place from Buschendorf, I guess ? "

The other displayed a sickly smile beneath his moustache. Joseph grew excited : " The wealth of the members of the Club amounts to one hundred and eleven millions, you remember what we read in the guide ? There are sixty-five of them. ' To make money, one must come where money is made.' Here we are. *Simler and Sons :* an excellent name for a firm ! I say, Wilhelm, when they are sixty-seven, in that pub, I doubt whether the two latest recruits will add much to the wealth of these gentlemen."

His brother's arms were pressed against the bosom in which reposed, upon stamped paper, the stipulations of the contract. Guillaume sought to react : " One hundred and eleven millions of clear property against seventy-five thousand francs of initial debt . . . without reckoning . . . what is to come. . . ."

" You have omitted from your balance-sheet two Simlers, one stout and one lean, each of them endowed with a keen desire to live ! "

They moved on again, casting at the Club an almost joyful glance, and, all of a sudden, at the next crossing, came upon *their* factory.

They did not expect it so soon. It gave them a shock.

They had just passed by at least a dozen big factories in which the stroke of noon had stopped all activity, as milk curdles in a bowl. But through the railings or beneath the porches, everything announced an untroubled prosperity.

The wagons loaded with bales of wool had halted by the sides of weighing machines polished by use. Baskets, heaped to overflowing with white spindles, drowsed aslant upon three handcarts at the gate of a building. The driving bands were swaying in the air, with a supple resilience, narrow paths of motive force at rest. No grass between the

paving-stones of the courtyards, whether because care had been taken to weed them, or because the grass never found time to grow there. The brick walls raised their squat elevation to four storeys without a crack in their mortar, without a broken pane in their windows. An acrid blackness enveloped the whole, but like a dust of superfluous wealth. The smell of small coal and briquettes, that of the sweat of wool, that of the acids used in dyeing, the smell of machine oil, of cloth damped for the presses, conveyed nothing in which the nostrils of the brothers Simler might not rejoice.

A true festival of labour, which was better able to find its way to their hearts than the smell of fried food. And yet they had had nothing in their stomachs, since their dinner overnight, save the bitter little roll with their morning coffee, barely softened by a pat of butter.

It stood before them as though it had come there without warning them. They had supposed that it was two blocks farther on. To tell the truth, they did not recognise it at first.

A low and leprous wall ran along one side of a lane. The front that faced the avenue was undistinguished. You came at once to the rusty gate, and immediately after it to the other angle of the wall. That was the end of the factory.

Everything was contained between these two angles, like a chest compressed between two bony shoulders.

And suddenly they were overwhelmed by the despair, the appalling apprehension of all the burden of their future. Joseph, who had recoiled to the opposite pavement, sat down upon a post, while his heart sank to the pit of his stomach.

It was some time before they ventured to exchange a glance. And yet they had spent part of the morning pacing this ground. There had afterwards been the plans and the

footrule. But imagination and the passion of combat had made of them things that were powerless against desire.

They contemplated stolidly one detail after another, and each detail rose before them, in its solidity and its mockery.

The wall was pitted with holes, its ridge of tiles was falling to pieces. The gate was crumbling. Deep gutters were carved through the clinkers of the courtyard ; a shower of rain would turn it into a quagmire. The cracked doorstep. A hole filled with rubbish at the foot of the weighing machine. From where they were, they could see only one corner of the main building ; a scrofulous tile dangled from the roof like a lip.

As for the lodging so suitable for a porter without a family, their thoughts returned to it incessantly. They thought of the spacious house in Alsace which had such ample room for them all, many as they were ; they dared not admit to themselves that this squat little cube, with its two skylights warped by the glare of the sun, was to settle upon their life, which would never emerge from it again.

" I . . . I don't quite remember how many rooms there are . . . there."

" We have perhaps been children . . . little senseless children."

Above all there was the absence of any odour. A rancid gust was wafted to them now and then in the eddies of the air. The corpse of the little factory opened, in the heart of the quarter, a well of silence. Its internal shadows were rent by the teeth of the broken window-panes.

" All the same we must reckon it up," murmured Joseph, stroking his scalp with a distracted air. The post on which he was sitting was a little too high for him. Only the tips of his toes reached the ground ; the hat that he was holding on his knees was shaken by a curious tremor. He heard his brother say : " This . . . factory never covered a hectare. It is . . . it is ridiculously small."

Joseph rose to his feet without replying. His head bare beneath the sun, he set off along the alley with a firm step. He moved along the wall counting his paces. He parted his stumpy legs with the activity of a beetle. His eyes never left the angle of the next corner, which advanced to meet him.

His brother watched him go, with a stupid stare in his eyes, and counted also, mechanically, his paces.

Having counted fifty, Joseph halted, struck his heel on the ground and turned. A considerable expanse of receding wall separated him now from the avenue, and kept him detached from it, at arm's length. He resumed his pacing. He asked himself whether there was room for thirty paces more before he reached the end. He had to struggle against the temptation to shorten his steps as the corner approached.

" Sixty, sixty-one—I wasn't wasting my time the day I learned to march in step—sixty-four, five, six—this wall can never be more than eighty metres—seven, eight—the plans were faked, what idiots we have been."

At eighty paces, there was still some ground left to cover. He hesitated, and could not help noticing at this point a slight weakening in the masonry.

At ninety-five, the irregular lines between the paving-stones took him as their centre, and began to circle slowly round him ; then their gyration became more rapid ; space swam in a circle before his eyes ; the irregularities of the stones were transformed into curving streaks of a prodigious immobility.

He steadied himself by placing his hand against the wall, scorched it, and continued on his way.

" Ninety-six, 'ty-seven, eight, nine . . ."

He did not know what exactly happened when he reached a hundred. For there still remained a certain length of wall, and this contracted, then drew back again in such a way that the corner was now within the reach of his fingers, now recoiled until it touched the horizon.

Bent double, the purchaser of the wall and of the factory regarded these transformations without surprise. He began nevertheless to run, and had reached the corner of the building before he had time to pass his fingers over it.

And the man whom he had left behind him had the strange experience of witnessing the following spectacle : at the end of a deserted alley, a figure clothed in brown was clinging with both hands to a dazzling wall, while his legs trod a frenzied war-dance. Indistinct cries reached him simultaneously :

" The plans are—correct ! Hullo—Wilhelm !—A hundred and twenty-five metres—a hundred and twenty—five—at—least ! "

Then it seemed to the watcher that a window had been opened somewhere, and that a cool draught began to circulate over the earth's surface.

He burst out laughing, turned his head round in search of somebody to whom he might communicate the surprising length of the little wall, saw that he was alone, and realised that the dancer in brown had taken advantage of his inattention to disappear.

At once a miracle occurred. The factory rose a storey higher. The porter's lodge became a commodious villa. The slender brick chimney was transformed into a sturdy column, a hundred feet high, and ready to stain the scorching sky with its smoke. The summer sunshine flooded interminable rooms, suspended from the beams of their ceilings as from the ribs of a giant.

They came together again side by side, their faces glued to the bars of the gate. Joseph was breathless, and had turned a deep purple.

" We are—a pair of idiots.—I have—I have walked round the—factory.—Everything is—is—is—perfect."

They spent the remaining hours that were at their disposal in rubbing their noses against the walls of *their* factory.

They yielded to the intoxication of constructing their life to come in the three dimensions of height, depth and width, —above all, width.

When they tore themselves away, their hands were blistered and they carried, upon their sleeves, specimens of the various kinds of plaster that had been laid on the building.

They went to find the post-office, the Chamber of Commerce, the canal wharf, then the nearest grocery and bakery —these last out of consideration for Hermine. They might then be seen, once again, halted in front of the Club.

About four o'clock, a wool merchant of tertiary importance was passing from his office to his warehouse, when he found himself confronted by two strangers who in a guttural accent addressed him by his name.

He gave, that evening, at the Cercle du Commerce, a description of them which remained, until the autumn, the sole documentary evidence as to the purchasers of the Poncet factory. For it is to be remarked that, throughout the whole summer, the agent remained scrupulously silent with regard to them.

They were, according to M. Boulinier, two perspiring men, of dishevelled appearance, and covered with an incredible coat of dust. It formed, he said, a sort of mask, beneath which it was difficult to make out their features.

They were evidently worn out ; the mask was contracted over the wrinkles of their skins ; they had not shaved for several days. Both of them spoke with a loquacity which he set down to over-excitement. The bigger of the two seemed to have taken charge of their external relations. He wore spectacles, and had put his collar in his pocket. He had a strong Alsatian accent which did not add to the clarity of his speech.

The other, a thin little man with big moustaches, interrupted him in a staccato voice which might be described as a sort of bark.

They had explained to him that they were cloth-weavers, at Buschendorf, in the annexed territory. As they refused to become German subjects, Simler, their father, had sent them to France, to find a vacant factory. They had arrived that morning, and had just become the purchasers of the Poncet factory. Their intention was to instal their material in October and to start weaving without delay.

They had shown him a perfectly genuine letter of introduction, signed by one Dollfuss, of Mulhouse. They had brandished under his nose, with the furious excitement of savages, the back of a stamped document, which was the agreement of sale to them granted by the authorised representative of the heirs of the Poncet estate.

Finally they had revealed the *ultima ratio* of their ambition : the two lumps of dust begged M. Boulinier to be so kind as to give his support to their candidature for the Club.

At the thought of this, the respectable little wool-merchant could not refrain from slapping his thighs with the palms of both his hands, while he leaned against the back of his armchair an honest round head swaddled in rolls of fat.

The Club listened to this tale with a barely concealed indifference. Then M. Boulinier, who never gambled, decided, this evening, to play the sly dog, sat down at a table, and was three hundred francs to the good before he began to repeat the half of his tale.

The part that he still did not mention was that he had buttered the Simlers with " My dear Sirs ! ", with " Will be so kind as to," with " Why, of course ! ", with " The idea ! ", with " If you will allow me ! ", and that he had incontinently offered to raise a second sponsor.

If the two Alsatians had been newborn babes, they would have left the town convinced they had not on the face of the earth any friend more devoted, body and soul, to their service than the little merchant Boulinier. But they knew that a tradesman's offers are not to be reckoned at more than

twenty-five per cent. of their worth, and instinctively made use of their knowledge.

IV

In the meantime, an unexacting time-table was jolting a small train along a railway that had been laid down upon principles of sordid economy.

From the summit of an embankment, the town had been visible to the Simlers, and also *their* factory, as soon as they were clear of the station buildings. The two Simlers dashed towards the one window on that side. It seized their two heads and held them in a vice-like grip.

The sight was worth the trouble of looking at it. It had been as ludicrous at first as a children's game with blocks. But the slope of the embankment joined this escorting view to the train, and combined them both in a single reality.

The travail of the town was audible in a deep groan. The tiled roofs spread out in sheets the reflection of the July sun. A hot vapour quivered on their surface.

The two hundred chimneys mentioned in the guide-book bent over it in the attitudes of caryatids. They poured out incessant gusts of smoke. These swelled at first where they rose, but a faint breeze from the east took hold of them and blended them in a single cloud.

A Cardiff mine was being exhausted to feed that tide of smoke. The clamour which darkened that patch of sky was paying six shifts of Welshmen for their toil. Two good trains on the English railways thrived upon it daily. Two or three marauding brigs had no other reason for their existence, in the distribution of the universal wealth, than to transport this ration of coal. They arrived one after another, their heads between their shoulders, their backs astream with water, affecting that sullen air which one contracts in steering across bad weather. When one of them returned, her

loading line in the air, dancing over the waves with the abandon of a Gibson girl, she assured the first collier who set eyes on her that the billows of the Channel were rolling to his feet, that two hundred chimneys were hungry and were waiting for him to feed them.

The Simlers were not fully acquainted with this sequence of facts ; but the silence of the black cloud was eloquent.

Moreover a sabre-blade advanced towards them at an angle over the surface of the valley, and, as they crossed it, dazzled them with sunlight. It was the canal. The evening light fell, rectilinear, upon wave after wave. They had just time to observe a dozen little oblong boxes, motionless and highly burnished. But they knew that these objects were proceeding, breast foremost, each of them rumpling the lacquered smoothness of the water, and that each was bringing three hundred mouthfuls of coal, at a ton to the mouthful.

The line described a wide curve halfway up the hill. The train found the gradient difficult. With the result that the town spun gently round at their feet.

The town in full activity—and their factory in complete repose. Repose was hardly the word. Their prevailing impression was that of an open wound in the flank of the town. An empty hole, and in that hole, their hope.

They passed above their future abode. The dark, silent courtyard, the dilapidated roofs, the four buildings welded together in a misshapen rectangle came beneath them.

And as the return of the curve inclined them towards the plain, the two men felt that they were gazing for an instant into the bowed heart of the chimney. It gaped beneath them its humid maw, soiled, humble, scarred on one side by lightning. The angle of the railway-carriage gave it the effect of sinking towards the north. It withdrew without straightening itself. A cloud of smoke from the engine enwrapped it. It disappeared. A corner of the building remained. A broken

pane had time to snip out a reflection of the sun, and was submerged. The gate reappeared and vanished, like a memory.

And when the smoke had melted, when they sought with their eyes the spot that was dearest to their hearts, the Lefombère spinning-mill masked all that quarter of the town with its faultless alignments.

A freight train flung itself between the Simlers and the valley. Its cars chopped up their view. The glimpses were intersected by patches of darkness and noise, like a semaphore worked by drunken giants ; some fifteen trucks, loaded with coal, were content, for a time, to threaten the rim of the valley with the flocking succession of their edges ; then a string of cars blocked the daylight once more, and the train escaped by swinging up the slope, with its thunder, its darkness, and its two rear wheels which caught up the wind.

" There'll be the devil to blame if next winter there isn't one of those cars with the name of Simler arriving at the station," murmured the big man, as though in apology for the hoarse sigh that he had heaved when he saw vanish in the direction of Vendeuvre freights addressed to other people.

Joseph made an effort to think of the future. Guillaume kept his eyes fixedly opened upon the present. He could not help thinking back to the factory at Buschendorf, as silent to-day as the one that had just vanished from beneath their feet. . . .

A squadron of Uhlans were billeted in the main building. It was, beneath the trees, a little elongated structure, with no upper storey, in which the handlooms were placed. It had seemed to them both, ten years earlier, an immensity which no human measure could calculate.

Their father paced up and down his room, his hands thrust into his pockets, his head lowered, his mouth filled with

blasphemies, and apoplexy gathered in a roll round his throat. He had not ceased to rage since the Prussians had invaded the little town.

At the first report from Wissembourg, he had stopped his looms, dismissed his workmen, locked his gate. The *pickelhauben*, in search of a billet, had forced the lock. The kicking of their horses shattered the wall of the woolshed. One heard at times the dull sound of a loom worked by some Saxon weaver, then a shout of laughter, and a shuttle crashed through a windowpane to rebound from the pavement of the courtyard.

Simler never left his room. His footsteps sounded all day long upon the waxed floor. In the course of time he had worn a sort of circular path upon it. Now and again the sound ceased. A chair crashed.

Their mother brought the weaver his food, which he swallowed between his oaths. She remained seated, for hours on end, before her lace-pillow, not venturing to raise her eyes. Buschendorf had been so quickly occupied by the advance-guard of German cavalry that the two sons had found themselves prisoners, before they had time to escape. No one could have told whether their father did not feel, in the midst of his humiliation and rage, a sort of relief. In that case, the broken chairs could alone have testified to the remorse which this sentiment inspired in him.

Guillaume and Joseph were bursting with the sense of their impotence. They paced up and down, on the grass, along the buildings. At the sight of a grey cloak, they went upstairs to shut themselves up in their bedroom, and devoured the German newspapers which the conquerors did not forget to leave lying about on the chairs.

A walk in the country was forbidden them. Sentries yawned beneath the gates in the old walls. They were under orders to present themselves, every afternoon, at five o'clock, at the office in the Hôtel-de-Ville. There, an elderly Captain

of the Landwehr, who had come in time to recognise them by the mere sound of their feet on the pavement, gave himself the amusement of proceeding daily, with fresh care, to the verification of their identity.

There were titters of laughter among those present when it came to the scar on the chest. This was a memento left to Joseph by a shotgun which, long ago, had burst in his hands. When the Captain ordered Joseph to strip, and moved round him, fingering the plump flesh of his body with his precise, magisterial fingers, the troops could hardly contain their merriment.

One day, Joseph had flung his shirt in the man's face. A formal intervention was needed to save him from a firing-party, or at least from deportation to Silesia. That day, Simler senior had come down from his room, and had not hesitated to reveal the entrance to a second cellar, hidden behind the woodpile. The Landwehr had begun by shouting at the top of his voice, strangling himself in his red collar. Old Simler's Alsatian had prevailed in the end over the Badisch in which the magistrate chattered, and the latter's spouse had seen her husband bring home fifteen cases of bottles of the best wine.

But when the father had retired, that night, to his room, he had escaped suffocation only by smashing the crystal globe over the clock on the chimneypiece, and by emptying the water-jug over his head.

And nobody could have told, even then, whether the fury of father and sons was not due to the silence of the looms, to the suspension of business and to the rapid approach of bankruptcy, as much as to the misfortunes of their country.

Guillaume had arrived at this stage in his memories, when a hand was laid forcibly on his forearm, while a lamentable wail sounded in his ears. He blinked his eyes, recognised the setting sun, recognised the town which was huddling out

of sight in the distance, recognised the compartment and Joseph who was thrusting towards him a face inflamed by tides of blood.

" Listen ! " said the other. From the plain a cry of superhuman distress had risen, and in a moment had occupied the whole of space.

It quivered in the air at first, alone. But the creature that was emitting this plaint must have stimulated others. It was taken up from the heart of the plain by a strident note. It broke out nearer to them with the whistling of a shell. A herd of beasts, mortally stricken, were uttering down there their deathcry.

The main street presented itself end on, diminished by distance.

" The end of a day ; their day ! " murmured Guillaume.

Labour was rendering up its soul. It was the hour at which one day more slipped into the sum of the days that had passed since the creation of the world. The amplitude of the cry measured the greatness of the irreparable. The sun was sinking behind the cloud that had invaded the atmosphere.

Then there appeared beneath the two men the little sharpened tongue of a steel point. It waited for the train, seized it by its wheels, and drew it violently to itself. They felt a shock, saw escape beneath the curve of the hill four strips of gleaming metal, were hurled to the left, and plunged, without a light, into something dark that roared. The tunnel, distance, and the mass of a hill of blind earth fell between them and the town.

Daylight returned to them. But the landscape which it illuminated offered them nothing in which their passion might find solace.

It was in vain that those pine trunks stood up in serried ranks against the gaping wound of the setting sun. In vain that the pond which lay bleeding in the depths of a ravine

shone for them with a solitary flash and was eclipsed. In vain that the line leaped from slope to slope, through the twilit forest, that the sound of the train, echoing in the thickets, startled the pheasants, and made the screech-owls perched on the tops of the beeches silently clap their wings, —that the brakes clenched with a scream upon a slope which drew them down towards the glimmering light of a plain.

It was in vain that they emerged from the night that had fallen to return to a night that was beginning, that the valley unlaced for them its bodice of hedges, orchards and roses. Vainly did the great river escape from a chalky cliff, lead towards them its motionless escort of poplars, and offer them, in a quivering curve, all the light that was dying between its banks. Vainly did the low water-meadows in which cows were kneeling among the grass, support the tracery of lengthening shadows. Vainly did the villages of white stone hold themselves suspended, facing the west, and remain, with a tiny round cloud, the last glowing shapes of the valley. Vainly did the Angelus hum round Norman belfries like bees round the opening of a hive. Vainly did Venus banish the last blood red streaks in order to instal her presence in the evening sky. Vainly did the daily miracle of the West repeat itself before the eyes of these two Alsatians.

At a bend in the river, a bridge, blown up eight months earlier to arrest the advance of Manteuffel, allowed its iron apron to trail in the water of the stream. And the brothers Simler went on, to seek, out there, in their native East, arguments for battle which had nothing in common with the somnolence of the most religious of summer twilights.

V

Guillaume remembered afterwards an interminable wait by the platform of a station. Steps had approached, along the roof of the carriage. A rattling sound had opened,

in the ceiling, an unplumbable violet orifice in the depths of which a star was shining. But the star had disappeared. They had witnessed a short contest between a wad of tow upon a stick and a little yellow flame. A sharp sound. The steps had withdrawn, leaving behind them a glass cage spotted with grease, inside which, attached to a metal arm, the little flame was struggling.

No matter. That feeble, agonising glimmer had been sufficient to expel the rest of the world from the overheated box. As soon as the lamplighter had dropped it into its place, a web of walls and darkness, equally dense, had reformed about the travellers.

In fact, night has begun. No one is conscious how long it will last.

A force seizes the carriage and draws it on. It has gripped it one knows not where, for the whole carriage shakes in unison. The dull roar of a forge mounts from the earth. Everything begins to vibrate.

It is a battle-royal. A question of transporting, to a distance of sixty leagues, while the night lasts, three hundred tons of inert matter, in a series of cubes.

Guillaume repeats to himself the terms of the problem. Three hundred tons ! He shuts his eyes. The draught that enters through the little open windows is not sufficient to dispel the odours which are poisoning the cell. The Alsatian rises among the jolts and unlaces his shoes. No sooner are they liberated than his feet begin to swell. He wriggles his toes in the white cotton of his socks, the hard creases of which are scorching his feet.

Before lying down again he scrutinises his brother. Joseph is already snoring. His head has slipped from the yellow travelling-bag on which he had laid it ; it has slipped down lower than his chest, to the very edge of the seat. One of his hands is trailing on the floor, on which an indescribable dust is stirring, to the breathless rhythm of the forge.

Guillaume has the painful sensation that this hand is made of gold-beater's skin. With misgivings he recognises once again in Joseph's appearance, the marks of the paternal authority. That instantaneous sleep, that spongy throat, those cheekbones accentuated by the sagging of the cheeks, make him think of the excessive reactions of that body, its notorious strength, its irresistible gaiety, its needs as instantaneous as its passions.

He asks himself once again what is the law that urges males of the same race to hate one another. At least he feels confusedly that there is a question which he should ask himself. But he has neither the time to ask nor the habit of asking himself such questions. He is on the point of taking Joseph's head in his hands and replacing it on its pillow of yellow pasteboard. He changes his mind and confines himself to touching his brother's shoulder :

" Up ! Up ! "

When Joseph at length opens a haggard eye, uttering in rapid succession, like his father, a string of interjections, he sees leaning over him a face in which it would take a very subtle mind to discern anything but affection and pure cordiality.

Joseph has fallen asleep again. The destiny of the Simlers keeps watch now only in the mind of Guillaume. Also doubtless, at Buschendorf, beneath a copper lamp, old and worn, in the mind of a mother whose anxiety accompanies their every step.

Guillaume repeats to himself the terms of the problem. Three hundred tons, sixty leagues. The flame of the lamp beneath which the mother, far away, is turning the pages of her Hebrew ritual, rises with a jet as calm as is frenzied the flame of the wick that writhes up above him, in its basin of oily glass.

Because everything, here, is a combat. Matter is inert. It refuses to know anything. Matter is solid. Distance is slender

and long. To make one pass over the other. That is the whole question. Friction. Heat. Guillaume Simler feels them as though the aching mass of his own body were being dragged, through the night, joint by joint, over the interminable gridiron of the metal track.

The night itself weighs upon him like a solidified mass. Guillaume Simler raises himself upon his elbow and tries to look out of the window. His glance is shot back at him. There is nothing outside but density, a wall of warm darkness. He strains his eyes. A tree, lightened by a momentary flash, stands out and vanishes, with a sigh. Nothing more. Guillaume drops back upon the seat. His travelling-bag slips one of its locks under his head and scratches him. The man grumbles for a moment, turns from side to side, and continues to explore the problem.

Guillaume Simler, by having contemplated it often, when as a boy he came home from school after dark, knows the reason of this weariness of a train that slackens its speed. The train is nothing more, at that hour, than a phantom in the heart of the summer night ; one end of it vomits smoke, flame, sparks ; at the other end is the triangle of three red lamps climbing the gradient ; and behind it, a well of silence and profundity, a vortex yawning at the foot of the embankment, the law of gravity, against which a phantom struggles desperately.

As a matter of fact, he had not supposed that there would be also a wagon of coal. Nor that the merchants were in the habit of loading their wagons so full. He watches with astonishment the efforts of an old horse, presumably white, its head emerging from a halter that is too large for it, to drag the enormous vehicle.

This appears at the corner of an avenue. The wagon jumps from one paving-stone to another with the sound of a battery of guns. A man swears as he thrashes with his whip the skeleton of his beast. And the rays of an infernal sun

writhe in every direction, enveloping the universe in the heat of a furnace.

And now, look, after the first wagon, appears a second, then, up the slope of a side-street, a string of others, all high, black, and over-loaded.

Albeit the metal tyres of the wheels are imitating, on the pavement, the hammering of a forge, Guillaume feels convinced that the load will never reach the top of the slope. He would like to explain to the driver of the first wagon that the law of friction prevents. . . . The man has come level with him ; he is indeed of abnormal stature. His black fingers have extracted from his overalls a dirty sheet of paper which Guillaume Simler knows well. And Guillaume Simler has no need to give a second glance at the invoice from the railway company.

" Delivered at the station ! Delivered at the station, you blockheads ! Can't you read ? What do you expect me to do with all this stuff at the house ? "

The carter makes a gesture of indifference and proceeds on his way mopping his brow with the veined back of his hand. The asphalt of the side-walk sinks under Guillaume's thin soles. He raises an alarmed glance at the string of wagons that are climbing towards him. He would like to move away. He is sure of what is about to happen. But he is no less sure that he is powerless to move away. He remains there, watching the procession of carts from which the coal trickles down in little avalanches, while the glittering band of the canal sears the corner of his left eye.

And he counts them. To satisfy his conscience. A delivery must be checked. He longs to go and pick up the crumbs of coal that are falling from the carts. It hurts him to see so much good fuel crushed beneath the wheels. Never has coal looked so oily, so rich. It is oily like wool. His attention is arrested by a lump of anthracite with flashing facets ; at length a wheel catches against it ; the cart appears to be

raised in the air ; but the lump is cracked like a nut, and dissolves in a rapidly subsiding cloud of dingy blackness.

Guillaume continues to count. The total is evidently correct. What is to be done with these three hundred tons when they reach the empty pit over which the weighing-machine should stand ?

Joseph has set off bare-headed to find a porter—a porter without encumbrances for the lodge that will be so comfortable for him. He seems to have entirely forgotten that it will have to house their father, their mother, Hermine and the children. Who will attend to the weighing ? Will it be their father who will open the gate ? Could not these cursed carters keep their coal in their own store, by the canal, confound them !

A smell begins to spread so persistently that Guillaume Simler turns his head to look up the street. What can that little man be doing dancing up there ? Is it from bravado that he is wearing on his head that extraordinary chimney-pot of battered silk ?

He opens his mouth, and puffs into Guillaume's face a stench of garlic and decaying teeth. He is as round as a barrel. Freckles swarm on his face like ladybirds ; they appear to be determined to make the most of a deep layer of dirt wedded to the vermilion of a generously stimulated complexion. " Black, yellow, red. The Belgian flag," thinks Guillaume, who cannot refrain from smiling.

" I . . . I just came to . . . that is to say to . . . present to . . . to Messieurs S . . . Sim . . . ahem ! *Smiler* and C . . . and C . . . and Company a few words of . . . ahem ! upon my word, I mean to say, of welcome."

It is not that he stammers. But he feels, at each word, so compelling a sense of expansion, fellow-feeling, radiant sympathy, that, upon my word, his utterance shows, I mean to say, the effects of so impetuous a gush of feeling.

Now M. Boulinier discovers, once again, that such a display

of warm-heartedness has produced its customary effect. The elder of the brothers Simler remains speechless. He cannot tell whether it is in his ears or in infinite space that the wheels of the moving carts are rumbling. And the gate shut (will Papa have opened it ?)—and the missing balance—Where on earth has Joseph gone ?

Guillaume believes that he is entitled to reply in the name of his father, M. Simler, the sole head of the house of Smi—ahem !—of the house of Simler, pure and simple, that the house of Simler regards itself as greatly honoured by the sentiments which M. Boulinier has so kindly expressed. (If his father had opened the gate, Guillaume would have heard the long-drawn owl-hoot which it gives when it turns on its rusty hinges : *a-hoo-oo !*). Guillaume Simler is happy to add that, in his own name, he, Guillaume Simler, is pleased to hope that his relations with M. Boulinier will be maintained upon a footing which . . . precisely ! In short, M. Boulinier must understand that such a day as this is not well-chosen, however delicate the sentiments to be expressed, for coming to waste the time of a man who is engaged in taking possession of . . .

Guillaume has no sooner uttered the words, than he is conscious of their incongruity. But not for all the wealth of the house of Rothschild, could he have refrained from speaking as he has done ; nor even from adding, coolly, that no doubt M. Boulinier will not refuse to fill the place of the balance which is lacking from the Simler establishment, in measuring this unexpected consignment of pit-coal with the aid of the footrule of which he is the graceful prop.

" Ha ! ha ! An e-excellent joke. I cannot help congra-tulating myself upon having entered into rererelations with so, I mean to say, ha ! ha ! so witty a customer."

In another moment, M. Boulinier would fall, in sheer joy, into the arms of the stupefied Guillaume.

" But to . . . to enable myself to enj-oy myself more

heartily, I have no dou-ou-bt that Monsieur S-S-*Smiler*, ahem ! junior, will relilieve me of all uneasiness with regard to a little dodocument which bears the honoured signature of his pa-apa."

Guillaume remembers then with horror that the first payment in the contract concluded with little M. Boulinier for the supply of wool is due this very day.

The elder of the Simler sons feels a tide of burning pitch flooding his brain. He will have to explain to this little barrel reeking of garlic the chain of circumstances that has led up to the postponement of their installation until this burning July afternoon.

A damp frost descends upon Guillaume and paralyses his mind. A man lost on foot in the heart of Central Australia is no farther from any human aid.

He makes a brief effort to recall what he ought to have remembered. Presently he preserves only the remotest trace of this last enlightenment. He clings hold of the notion that there exists, somewhere, an urgent memory, which would make everything clear.

All these efforts exhaust him. He turns away, wearily nodding his head in which vacuity tolls like a bell. The Belgian national colours vanish. A second neighbour, whom he did not hear approach, is standing on his left, and leans towards him stiffly.

His cocked hat, his pale blue coat and the metal plate which shields his heart proclaim the day of the month to Guillaume, more infallibly than would a calendar. The messenger of the Banque de France represents nothing more than a cipher, the fatal *thirty-one* of which the *three* rears itself up, on its curly tail, with the arrogance of a creditor certain of his claim, while the *one*, an equivocal symbol, defies, commands and threatens.

The man opens his mouth. It emits a shriek which Guillaume compares with astonishment to that of the factory

gate : *oo-ooh !* The man announces himself with the word by which housewives designate him :

" *Ooh !* The banker ! *Oooh !* "

But already the plate of sheet-armour and the gimlet nose are no more than an image that has receded to the end of a familiar road.

It is the Saturday evening walk. Father, in his frock coat, is wearing an old-fashioned top-hat. Mother has her Chantilly bonnet fastened under her chin with two ribbons of black silk. The children, tightly breeched in their best trousers, trudge between the sorb-trees of the footway, sullenly kicking up the dust.

It has been hot. It is still parching. Their feet are burning after having walked too far on the too hot ground. A breath of cool air comes from the wood round which the road turns, and flows down their throats, at each breath, like cherry-syrup swallowed in little sips. The children glance furtively at the suspicious shadows which lurk in the wood. Cockchafers go blundering through the twilight with a snoring hum. Frogs part the dusty grass of the ditch ; when they think themselves unobserved, they let fall their sonorous cry, liquid as a drop of crystal.

But the father has halted. He is talking to an obese man whose fingers are loaded with pinchbeck rings. Mother remains half a pace behind him. She lends an anxious ear.

The conversation between the two men grows animated. The stranger points again and again at some one whom Guillaume ends by recognising, in spite of himself. It is a question of Joseph and himself. Moreover that dusty apathetic lump is not unknown to him.

He looks at Joseph. Joseph looks at him. They would gladly be anywhere else. Is it because they long to drink ? They are no longer either hot or thirsty. Is it the evening breeze that comes from the wood ? Their sweat freezes them, their teeth chatter.

The father calls them. The stranger has extracted from his pocket a paper which he strikes violently with the back of his right hand. Guillaume gazes at him with a fixed stare.

" Come here ! " Simler shouts at them from between his whiskers. His wife intercedes :

" Hippolyte ! "

" Silence ! They must be taught a lesson ! Wretches, did you hear what Monsieur has just said ? Is it true ? Is it true that you have ruined me ? "

The obese man studies them with severity. The legal document, which he clasps in his fingers, quivers with a faint rattle. One has no need of this evidence to guess that its possessor conceals, in a pocket of his frock coat, a flask of *schnapps*.

The silence of the guilty parties is a confession. They stand there, both of them, their feet in the dust, like a pair of idiots. A great tension takes the place of all sounds. Everybody knows, from Rouffach to Soulzmatt, what father Simler's anger can be. It bursts out all of a sudden, like the clap of thunder a moment after the lightning. But who would ever dream of smiling, if the father took it into his head to shout, dwelling upon the final word :

" Fifteen minutes stop, refreshments, passengers for Orléans change here ! "

VI

The two Simlers travelled across Paris like lifeless parcels. Then they submitted with resignation, at Troyes station, to passport formalities the mere suggestion of which would, eighteen months earlier, have been regarded as an excellent joke.

Uhlans, wearing flat-topped helmets with horsehair plumes, found great diversion in making them spin round

like teetotums. And they spun like teetotums filled with submission, unaffected by anything that did not threaten their future, and was not a bed on which they might lie down and sleep.

Then there came the first tobacco-fields ; their alignments took as their centre a point on the horizon and began at once to rotate at full speed about this centre, in such a way as to flick the travellers with the extremities of their radii.

There was a second dusk, which forests of fir and oak packed close about them. Then a harsh odour, greeting them in their native language, spoke to them of great shadowy hopfields, and made them raise their heads and gaze at each other with haggard eyes.

They arrived at Mulhouse station when they were beginning to despair of ever again arriving at any station in the civilised world.

They took their places in the refreshment-room, at a narrow marble table, between two open doors which engaged them in a battle of winds. Beer was brought to them in thick glasses which became misted before their eyes, in token of the coolness of their contents. They studied with satisfaction the massive build, the fair complexion, the yellow hair, and the air of studious and loyal devotion of the waiter, as he skimmed the froth from the mugs with a little bat of white wood. And when they had wiped off the mist with a stroke of the thumb, when the beer revealed itself to them, through the ribs of the glass, with its dazzling transparence, its musical sparkle, its vigorous and amber colour, then a slight feeling of confidence arose in the hearts of the brothers Simler.

They did not admit to themselves that they were returning to their native land to hasten the moment in which they would abandon it for ever. Nor that every expense which they incurred, from then onwards, must add to the burden of their debts and constitute, strictly speaking, a crime

against their future. They allowed themselves to be quietly invaded by the security that is given us by the land in which we were born. They raised their mugs with a simultaneous movement, happy to feel the handles press against the palms of their hands. They exchanged, over the brims, a glance full of connivance, and drank.

A fringe of froth was still in the process of evaporating on their moustaches, when they summoned the waiter again. They ordered two portions of larded sausages with cabbage and potatoes, followed immediately by two stalwart veal cutlets, swimming in their own juice, and buried in a field of haricot-beans.

Appetite came with eating. They turned ogreish glances on the bill of fare, which the waiter had carelessly left on the table. They cleaned the narrow dishes of white earthenware, upon which they were served, with ample sponges of bread-crumb which their grimy fingers extracted from the heart of the loaf.

The Simlers ordered for each of them two thick slices of galantine, variegated like a map of the United States and fringed by tidal seas of pale jelly, the frozen aspect of which appealed to them. A fruit-dish, upon which big white cherries, stalks in air, bristled with a mass of green bayonets, gave them the desire to eat to excess, so as to dissolve the surfeit in the acid juice of the fruit.

The doors were now driving in buffets of night air, like children playing ball. With their food and the end of this day, there entered into them a heavy and artless gaiety. Joseph thrust back his straw hat ; his spectacles on his forehead, like a schoolmaster's giglamps, he began to play stupid tricks. The stupefaction of the other travellers was immense when they saw this corpulent gentleman blow solemnly into his glass so as to bedew his nose with the froth, and then assume the air of a startled marmoset. Guillaume was no less solemn in peeling the sausage-skins in bracelets, and, having

hung them upon the neck of a pursy water-bottle, shot at the corpulent effigy the most passionate glances.

These water-drinkers, whom two glasses of beer intoxicated, devoured their sausage-meat with the hilarity of orchard-robbing schoolboys. Had they been able, at that moment, to call for oysters, no power human or divine could have restrained them. Fortunately for the law of Moses, the refreshment-room at Mulhouse did not supply oysters, and an official flung at them suddenly, through the door, the warning that their train was about to start.

They paid their bill in haste, filled their pockets with cherries, and, their hands seared by the handles of their baggage, set off at a trot in the direction of their platform.

They had no indignation left for the guard of Prussian infantry, whose helmets reflected the light when the sentries passed beneath the lamps. Everything seemed to them to be in order, and to be administered with a view to universal satisfaction. No sooner were they installed in their compartment than they fell asleep, sitting up, like beasts of burden.

. . . . . .

The spreading roofs of Buschendorf covered low, white houses, decked with vines and climbing roses. And these white houses contained a number of people who looked to the decision reached by the two brothers for some enlightenment as to their own destiny.

For, between half the town of Buschendorf and the Simler factory, there was a solidarity hardly less perceptible than between the white houses of the place and their own thatched roofs.

As for telling which, the factory or Buschendorf, might be called the roof, and which the house, that was another question.

Was it the factory that protected the houses of the town,

in the manner of a kindly and benevolent roof, providing it with privacy, shelter, warmth and light ?

Or was it the town that had protected the beginnings of the factory, providing it with the water from its wheel, the stones for its walls, the arms of its workmen, and even the small loans to which the vicissitudes of industry had obliged the Simlers to have recourse, at periods which they did not care to hear mentioned ?

Nobody could have given a satisfactory answer to the question. Buschendorf and the Simler factory were two entities which the imagination of Upper Alsace instinctively associated. People said : the Simlers-of-Buschendorf, not so much to distinguish them from a number of other Simlers, scattered between the Black Forest and the Meurthe, as because these Simlers, who lived and laboured at Buschendorf, might indeed be regarded as the most characteristic product that Buschendorf had, up to the present, manufactured. They embodied its spirit, its ideal—I would go so far as to say that they were its substance, were not certain minds always inclined towards malicious interpretations.

When two travellers in raw wool, in madder, or in fuller's soap, or even two cattle-dealers, unconnected with the woollen trade, met upon one of the roads that connected Buschendorf with the outer world, it was seldom that one of them did not say :

" It is to Buschendorf that you are going, my friend ? A charming little town. You know of course Hippolyte Simler, a very capable man ? No ? Then his brother Myrtil, the one who is unmarried, and has a birthmark on the left side of his face, like that ? No ? Then Sarah Simler, Hippolyte's wife, who is the daughter of Moïse Blum, the Lorrainer ? Not her, either ? I shan't ask you, then, if you know Wilhelm Blum, the cloth-merchant, Hippolyte's brother-in-law, a fine man, to be sure, but, between ourselves, a trifle *schlemihl*. Whereas Hippolyte Simler, there's a fellow who's

afraid of nothing, a man who does very good business, upon my word, who is very well off indeed. We shall drink a glass of beer at Soulzmatt station, if you like, and I shall tell you their story since they were little boys. Do you think I haven't known them ! My late father and Jonathan Simler, Hippolyte's father, went to school together, and Jonathan often hadn't a scrap of food in his satchel, and it was my father who used to feed him out of his. To-day, I would be glad to exchange my satchel for his, ha ! ha ! . . ."

Thus, once again, Buschendorf found itself associated with the destinies of the Simler family, as though the town had sprung to life, ready-armed, from the activity and careful forethought of the Simler family.

. . . . . .

It was a sober little village of two thousand inhabitants, without luxury or pretension, and the Simler mansion was in keeping with the rest. An old, square house, whose two storeys were modestly crowned with a broad roof of squat, concave tiles. A bit of railing, a few yards of path and three steps to the door were sufficient to separate the " château " from the street.

The steps were of grimy sandstone, chipped at the edges. The passage of feet had long ago heaped the gravel in little mounds along the borders in which a few pinks bloomed. The railing was not six feet high ; it had lost all memory of its last coat of paint ; every spring, Sarah Simler would say, in an indifferent tone : " You must send me Pouppelé to paint the railing " ; and, every spring, Hippolyte would shrug his shoulders with an air of exasperation as he answered : " It is quite good enough as it is. Upon my word, it can wait. I need Pouppelé myself."

And yet, neglected as it was, this strip of railing contained in itself an aristocratic virtue sufficient to swell the Simler heart with pride. People said to strangers : " You will have

no difficulty in finding it : a house, with a railing in front of it, on your right, after you have passed the square, a fine, big house. You can't miss it. Besides, you have only to ask for Monsieur Hippolyte, anybody will show you the way at once. It is the only railing in Buschendorf."

More than once, in consequence, in delicate circumstances for pride or dignity, the memory of three stone steps, of a few square yards of gravel, and of a little unpainted iron gate was a comfort more effective than any number of exhortations.

That evening, the gravel crunched under uneven steps, and two shadows were roaming between the gate and the front door. The moon, in its last quarter, had not yet risen. The hesitating gait of the shadows suggested the monotonous to-and-fro of a shuttle, upon which someone had slowly wound a strand of anxiety.

" I repeat to you, Hippolyte was right, and you must have faith in your sons. They will have acted for the best. I know Guillaume."

The man who spoke thus had a rumbling voice. When he turned his back to the railings, his shoulders stamped their outline upon the bluish wall of the house ; whenever he put his left foot to the ground, his bulk foundered suddenly, as though his foot had struck against the cam of a loom. He was wearing a little soft cap, which his head swelled from inside.

The woman seemed, by his side, to be of tall stature. Her hands folded across her skirt made the only spot of light on the uniform darkness of her figure.

" I have faith in Guillaume," she said ; " Joseph too knows his duty. But they are young, they may have taken ideas into their heads. And Hippolyte is so absolute ! "

" What was to be done ? Hippolyte was not fit to go there himself."

" They should have stayed here ! "

The woman's voice quivered in harsh tones. She straightened her lean figure as she walked. The man seemed to be lowering his head.

"You are not finding fault with Hippolyte, I hope, Sarah?"

She kept him waiting for her answer during the time that it took them to walk from the steps to the gate. Then she stopped and gazed at the road from which no sound came.

" Who am I, to find fault with anyone? Have they consulted me? "

The man was silent in his turn, as though the words that had just been uttered had a remote and irrefutable meaning. It was the woman who broke the silence, after heaving a sigh, and in a curiously lowered tone.

" What would be the good? Stay here or go. We should have to begin afresh, in any case. As soon as Hippolyte and Myrtil came to that decision, and the boys agreed . . ."

" The Altermanns are staying."

" What difference does the Altermanns' decision make to Hippolyte and his brother? "

The rapid, hissing accent of this retort made the cripple withdraw, with the submission of a man who is outwitted in this sort of tactics. He abased himself without shame :

" Certainly Hippolyte has no need to have the way pointed out to him."

And as the woman, by keeping silence, seemed to encourage him, he went on :

" It is always he that has shown us our way. Joseph . . . Joseph is his living image. Your Guillaume takes more after you."

" I don't know. Perhaps Guillaume is more . . ."

The thought that occurred to her was doubtless one of those which people suppress, for she did not continue.

A window opened in the wall a rectangle of light. Figures were visible within, passing to and fro. As they passed, their

shadows fell upon the garden. The sacred border of pinks enhanced their distortion with unforeseen irregularities.

One of these shadows lengthened upon the gravel path, and halted. Its arms raised crosswise left no doubt as to the violence of the feelings that were convulsing its person.

Sarah Simler, escorted by the cripple, was at that moment returning from the gate towards the house. She stopped speechless to gaze at the monstrosity endowed with life which was moving silently at her feet. She was pointing it out to her companion, when the shadow seemed to relax and, after a moment of hesitation, fled hotfoot towards the sorb-tree in which it was swallowed up.

The woman could not restrain a murmur.

" Myrtil . . . will Myrtil never leave *him* in peace ? "

The front door of the house opened ; a flood of light shot down the steps ; a figure rose up in an attitude of authority ; a voice cried :

" Sarah ! Sarah !—and you too, Wilhelm."

The speaker had added this name on hearing the cripple's step crunching on the path. But it was evident that the presence or absence of Wilhelm did not matter to him in the slightest degree.

VII

There were four of them in the room, when the cripple had shut the door behind him.

A massive body, seated on a reclining-chair, had its back to the light. Its head was bent forward, revealing a blood-shot neck, furrowed with wrinkles.

The man who had summoned the other two stood erect, his fist upon the table.

A ceremonial black cravat helped his neck to sustain his head above its long thin column. The agile skeleton of his

swarthy hands barely emerged from the overlong sleeves of his frock coat, of military cut, which a pair of horizontal, narrow, square, muscular shoulders brought to an abrupt finish. Macerated as though by smallpox, his face projected three salients, over which the skin was tightly stretched, suggesting the ivory surface of a billiard-ball. A couple of shadowy furrows crossed it laterally, one, the higher of the two, beneath the ridge of his eyebrows, the other under his nose.

It was in the former that lurked the gaze of Myrtil Simler, from the latter that issued the metallic inflexions of his voice.

Contracted between his temples, his birdlike skull extended backward, drawing after it a pair of finely shaped ears, pointed at the top. Two ropes of brown hair started from it to loose themselves beneath his cravat. They assured to the general effect a haughty backward thrust, and prevented the head of Myrtil Simler from ever adopting the inclinations typical of characters devoid of energy.

And then, a final harmony, a delicate nose, trenchant as a Moorish scimitar, hollowed beneath the cartilage and vigorously curved, affirmed a descent free from any mixture of blood. An aristocracy that was not refuted by the arch of the foot, within its elastic-sided boot.

Never did a Judge of the Supreme Court watch a Minister take his place in the dock with an air of dignity so imperious as that of Hippolyte Simler's brother, when he watched the entry, into the room in which he was standing, of Sarah and the cripple.

At the moment when the latter shut the door behind him, he turned his judicial mask towards the man with the expansive neck and uttered these words :

" Hippolyte, here are Sarah and your brother-in-law."

Even without the raucous, hammering sound of the voice in which these words were uttered, there would still have

been reason for astonishment. For their meaning, to all appearance anodyne, bore no relation to the severe tone of the man who had uttered them. And most of all, because in turning to address his brother he had brought into the lamplight a cheek deformed with a large wine-coloured blemish, over which a bloodshot eye hurled a glance charged with indignation.

From the chair, without any raising of the neck, rose a loud, throaty voice.

" What o'clock is it ? Oughtn't the children to be here ? "

" It is not ten yet, Hippolyte," replied the cripple, taking a step forward beneath Myrtil's contemptuous glare. As he spoke, he drew from his pocket an old plated-gold watch in a double case, the key of which hung from his chain.

" They could have sent a telegram, I suppose," the neck continued.

Myrtil turned his judicial mask towards his sister-in-law, and appeared ready to weigh the answer that he expected of her.

Sarah unfolded her hands from in front of her skirt of flowered satin. She pushed back one of the ribbons that were hanging from her bonnet, and sighed :

" Have a little patience, Hippolyte. The children can't have had much of a time, themselves. Heaven knows how tired they'll be when they do arrive. If they haven't arranged everything according to your idea, calm yourself. You know that they will have acted for the best. Myrtil and you will settle everything that isn't quite correct."

" Those are easy things to say at home ; in business, signed, settled."

These words fell from the thin lips of Myrtil like so many hammer-blows upon the anvil of the public conscience. Having spoken, he drew himself sharply erect.

A hurricane ran through the neck ; a roar filled the room :

" Signed ? And why should they have signed ? What is it

that they have signed? People don't *sign*, when they risk involving their father, their family, their fortune."

"You gave them your power of attorney, Hippolyte," murmured the cripple in a smooth voice. Sarah shrugged her shoulders, and moved with unhurried step towards the sideboard, which she opened.

But there had been a movement in the chair. Hippolyte had turned round. Something like a tide of the sea swept into the lamplight. A mass that seemed flat because of its breadth, filigreed with red veins in the place of cheeks, and backed by one of those thick skulls whose monumental front makes one conscious of their density and volume.

Grey, bushy whiskers enlarged still farther the yellowish entablature of the flesh. The features that formed his face were concentrated in this aspect of it. With the result that the man never looked at one save with his full face. The greater part of this plane surface was unaffected by the movements which convulsed its centre. It seemed to be always holding half the horizon in its gaze. Hence that fixity, in which there was nothing human, but which suggested the slowness proper to the movements of nature. His immobility was astronomical.

His fascinating stare rested upon the cripple. He placed him in the centre of his field of vision, and seemed to be gripping his image between his eyebrows, as though he had made an effort in order not to overlook so meagre a figure in a vaster contemplation.

"Have you become an idiot, Wilhelm?"

At the sound of the syllables which foamed from between his whiskers, and then rolled from his lips, the crockery on the sideboard rattled.

"An idiot, Hippolyte? What do you mean?" replied the cripple with the utmost simplicity. But it was evident that the rumbling voice had not prevailed.

"An idiot, or an enemy?"

" Brrrrm ! " said Myrtil, drawing himself up abruptly to examine from a greater altitude the man who was addressed in this fashion. Wilhelm trustfully expanded ten stout fingers filled with honest conviction, and offered the palms of his hands as a pledge of his sentiments.

" When you signed a power of attorney for your sons . . ."

" Who was the first to speak, in this house, of a stamped document ? " uttered the face.

" Brrrrm ! " Myrtil gave his support.

" It . . . was I, Hippolyte, I don't dream of denying it, but . . ."

" But ? " shouted the other. " Let me tell you what there is in that *but* ; there is this, that, at the present moment, my two sons are I don't know where, and, I don't know where, with them, in a portfolio, in a portmanteau, or in the drawer of a bed-table, there is the stamped paper, at the foot of which all the world can read the signature of Hippolyte Simler ; and, you see this lamp, and this table, and the cloth upon this table, and the silver, and the house we are in, and the factory, the looms, the wool, my coat—by a word written over that signature we may lose everything, destroy everything, give away everything, and . . . Sarah ! bring me the pen I used to sign ! "

" Brrrrm ! " Myrtil gave his support.

" And when I wrote those two words : Hippolyte Simler, do you know, you, what I was writing ? Listen here, it was : Simler ruined."

" You think so ? " exclaimed Sarah from the other end of the room.

" What else would you have me think ? My name is roaming the wide world on a blank sheet of paper, and you haven't yet shut me up in the madhouse ? Bring me the pen, I tell you. It is the first time anybody has seen a man divide himself in two, and sit in his chair without moving, while he goes out proclaiming to the entire world : ' Who wants

Simler's factory? Who wants the money of the Simlers of Buschendorf?' Have you found that pen?"

"But after all," exclaimed the cripple with more vigour than might have been expected of him, "your signature is not roaming the world by itself, nor in the hands of enemies. Your children . . ."

"My children are my children. Is there any reason why I should make them my masters? Why I should give them greater power over myself than my father *selig* ever wielded?"

Myrtil, shaken by a gust of tragic feeling, gave a jerk, in the lamplight, to the chessboard of his face. His eyes darted from his brother to the cripple. The latter stepped forward, casting at the farther end of the room the despairing glance of a doctor renouncing all hope of curing his patient. He laid his cap on the edge of the table and said:

"If any harm should come from the power of attorney which you have given your sons to act in your name, I allow you to blame nobody but myself. It was I alone that advised you. I persist in believing that they will have justified the confidence that you have placed in them."

"That is all right, Wilhelm; I know my sons better than anyone, and we shall soon be settled, I think," replied the master of the house in an unanswerable tone. And he turned his face towards his wife, as though he held her personally responsible for the punctual arrival of their two sons.

"In any case," he went on, bringing Wilhelm once more within his horizon, "I may be mad, I am not yet weak-minded. If I have given my signature, I have not done so in ignorance of what I was doing. Nobody, not even Myrtil . . ."

"Brrrm!" said his brother, striking the table nervously with the hand that was leaning upon it.

". . . has ever yet made me do anything that I had not already decided to do."

A steam-roller does not make a road more smooth than was the cripple's conscience after this admonition. As a matter of fact, he would have been greatly surprised had anyone told him that no diplomacy could have proceeded with a more prompt adroitness than his own in cooling the wrath of the great Simler, and that by making the manufacturer assume responsibility for the power of attorney, little Blum had deprived his pride of its most stimulating nourishment.

But such subtleties, frequent as they might be, were powerless to add to the self-satisfaction even of the man who employed them. Simler's voice had not finished sending its stormy echoes to the four corners of the room before an abject humility had taken up its abode in Wilhelm's heart. He drew back his cap which in a moment of expansion he had laid on the table, and, literally, bent his back beneath the furious glare of the two brothers.

When Sarah brought her husband, not without hesitation, the writing-pad and pen for which he had asked her, she too replied to her brother's glance with an expression which confirmed their scorn :

" What can a Blum from Thionville know of the decisions and intentions of Hippolyte Simler of Buschendorf? And even though this Blum from Thionville be my own brother, he has only to look at himself to learn that he is not of a stock that can set his foot where the Simlers set theirs."

Wilhelm had no need to look at himself, in order to feel weighing upon him, morally as well as physically, the shoulders, the eyes and the opinion of the Simlers.

It is not necessary for a man to be a great expert in psychology in order to know the capital value of a hunched back, a clubfoot, a pair of startled, squinting, colourless eyes, hair of a neutral tint, inclining to red, scanty everywhere, a skin like a cheese-scraper, and a voice devoid of any resonance. Especially when this is your own personal lot,

and you have been putting it, for five and forty years, to the daily proof of the vast world and its circumstances.

The vast world, indeed, in its supreme order and its perfect wisdom, is more prone to condemn a crooked spine or a stumbling gait, than it is to appreciate how indispensable are the goodness of a mouth free from malice, the malice of an honest thick nose, full of sensual kindness, the cordiality of a loyal back, and the brotherly gesture of a stumpy, hairy hand, with square-cut nails.

For the moment, Wilhelm Blum, ill at ease as to his bodily attributes, and embarrassed outwardly by an indefinable grey suit, had just taken back, in his hand, the woollen headgear which in a moment of expansion he had laid upon the table ; and registered, to enrich his collection, the look with which his sister cast him forth from the Simler clan.

Nevertheless a ring encircled one of his fingers, rather as a hoop encircles a little barrel. And this alliance indicated marriage, a family, a household.

The Simlers were great. But, at this moment, it did not appear that their humble brother-in-law, the cloth-merchant Blum, enjoyed the companionship of a woman. And yet the hour was late ; if he was still there, it was not, obviously, for any personal motive ; if he opened his mouth, it was not to discuss his own private affairs ; if the circumstances were painful for anyone, they did not seem to be so for him.

He was there, remote from his own people, seeking the best way to appease the wrath of Hippolyte Simler, and anxiously awaiting his two nephews, returning from their journey into an unknown world.

Thus it is that things happen. It is bad taste to be surprised at them. To be touched by them is a weakness. To notice them, even, superfluous. Wilhelm Blum knew his duty.

But a step crunched the gravel ; he could not refrain from

hastily pulling out his fat onion of a watch. Myrtil with a harsh gesture turned his head over his left shoulder. Sarah's arms dropped on the table the writing-pad, the ink in which had turned to lead. Hippolyte alone did not move.

" But it is not . . . it is not time yet," muttered the cloth-merchant. Two sharp knocks reminded the occupants of the room that between them and the world there was only a door.

A face whose bright eyes were supported upon heavy moustaches, appeared.

" No news yet, Monsieur Hippolyte ? Madame Hippolyte, your servant."

His eyes grew accustomed to the dim light in the room.

" Good evening, Monsieur Myrtil.—Ah ! "

This " ah ! " fell to Wilhelm, to whom the newcomer confined himself to offering his hand with a marvellously skilful blend of familiarity, protection and at the same time respect ; Blum was, after all, a brother-in-law.

" As you see, Fritz," replied Monsieur Hippolyte from his full face. A silence fell. Then the head of the house of Simler added : " Nothing ! " in so sharp a tone that everyone started. Fritz appeared embarrassed at having shown his impatience. He pursed his lip under his drooping moustache.

" We thought, perhaps, a telegram . . ."

His master gazed at him fixedly, and lowered the corners of his mouth ; the effect was an astonishing expression of disdain.

" And so here is another person who can't wait. Bear this in mind, Fritz : if you wish to succeed in life, it means waiting, and understanding."

This fine moral uttered for the admiration of his audience, the fiery old man at once forgot its substance. His eyebrows rose side by side, to retain before his eyes the insignificant figure that had addressed him, and he continued, fresh storms gathering in his voice :

" Fritz Braun, you and yours are waiting, and yet you do not know why you are waiting, you do not know for what you are waiting. What is your object? There must be an object in everything, even in worrying and waiting. Have you one, you? If I go, the buildings remain, a Prussian is sure to come to start the factory again and give you work. You have no object, either you or your comrades, in waiting for my sons to return."

The Alsatian remained motionless beneath this torrent of insulting implications. He gave to the soldierly planes of his face the most innocent expression that it was in his power to give them.

Hippolyte Simler went on, in a louder tone :

" For me—for me, my brother Myrtil, my wife, it is another question. You see this pen, Fritz? "

Although he was accustomed to the manufacturer's unexpected outbursts, Fritz was taken by surprise. A monstrous hand, fat to bursting-point, reached out from the chair to the table. It covered the writing-pad, and seized the fragile stick of firwood.

" Look, it is neither thick nor heavy. How much time does it take to write a name with this little pen? Very well, that has been enough, and that is why you find me, at this hour of the night, waiting still for my sons to return without knowing whether I am still in my own house, whether I am still a weaver, or whether I must abandon everything to begin again, elsewhere. There you have *my* object, mine. When the head is weak, a man needs strong legs. My head was weak one day, Fritz. Perhaps other people have taken advantage of it. Let this serve as a lesson to all those who place themselves in the hands of others."

A sharp crack concluded this speech. The monstrous hand made a gesture, and the fragments of the penholder went flying to the ends of the floor. Myrtil uttered a sharper " Brrrrm ! " than usual, then a stifling silence filled the room.

His head lowered, Wilhelm went over in vain, in his memory, the points of his apology. Fritz Braun endeavoured to conceal his terror beneath his sheepish air, and felt that he knew all that there was to know. Sarah gazed at her husband with a sombre admiration.

Fritz summoned up the courage to speak :

" Monsieur Hippolyte, it is not the opportunity that makes the thief, nor the work that makes the workman. There are men who have confidence in one another. You say things, and we believe them. You go ahead, the rest follow you. With you, one is never led astray. Monsieur Guillaume and Monsieur Joseph are sons of whom any father might be proud. Whatever arrangement they may have made, it will be white bread for us. This, my comrades have not sent me to tell you. But I tell you it all the same, both for myself, and for them. There."

It was the turn now for the fair moustaches to swell, for the level brows to rise, and the Alsatian face assumed planes more martial than ever.

To himself, the foreman was thinking :

" *Zum Teufel !* This devil of a man always makes one say more than one meant."

Hippolyte held him under the impassive command of his face. Blum looked at his own feet. Myrtil appeared strangled by his black cravat.

The duty of the alto, in a choir, is to stir our feelings by the most difficult means. Now it was repellent to the pride of the house of Simler to acknowledge its moral debts. It was to a woman's voice that this duty was, as a rule, delegated.

Sarah stepped forward, with that calm and measured pace which had won her the name of *Königin Simler.*

A stainless dignity enhanced the meagre stature of an aging woman. She allowed no wrinkle to betray her feelings beneath the impeccable, slightly yellowed varnish which seemed to be spread over the skin of her face.

The law of the Orient, which orders everything with wisdom, for it has known mankind since the day of Creation, has taken steps to secure that woman shall remain the helpmeet of one man alone, and shall not circulate from one to another, an object of coveting and a subject of discord. And so Sarah concealed her poor grey tresses, as she had begun by concealing, on the morrow of her wedding, the heavy plaits of her girlhood. Her mother before her had done likewise; her daughter-in-law had followed her example. A *front* of black silk framed the ivory of her brow. The ringlets that fell in front of her ears, from beneath a rich cap of Chantilly lace, were made of false hair. But inasmuch as deceit was born in the Continent of supple sandals, and coquetry awaited our mother Eve at the gate of Paradise, a thread of white silk, stitched across the *front*, imitated the parting which divides the natural hair.

A sign of mourning which celebrates, from generation to generation, the dispersal of the tribes.

Only the whiteness of a collar of white linen, doubled over the black silk of her bodice, and that of her two hands folded over her bosom, interrupted the funereal livery.

Such a woman, silent, secretive, and acknowledged as mistress in her own house, soon acquires the air of royalty before which everyone must bow. The shortest women find their stature increased by it. Beneath the imperious circumflex accent which divided her brow, on either side of a large nose, protruding and curved in a gesture of command, Fritz Braun could see a pair of eyes which rested upon him without fear. A velvet which emerges refreshed from beneath the hot iron, distant memories, irony as to the present, regret for the past, a sorrowful calm at heart. An exact knowledge, a profound ignorance, certainty of her own limitations, valour within them, resignation without. This gaze of an unduly precocious child, of a mother for ever

innocent and an old woman who could still beguile, overpowered the solid virility of the Alsatian. And the phrase of renunciation that was commonly uttered at Buschendorf sounded in his ears : " The man who is caught between the mouth of Hippolyte Simler and the eyes of Madame Hippolyte, is no longer his own master."

" We are passing through a painful time, Fritz Braun. But you have just uttered the only words that could soothe my husband's grief. These are things which one does not forget. You see how we are placed. Our whole life is in the balance. But, if you, and your friends . . ."

" Take care ! " the foreman warned himself.

". . . are on our side, I have no longer any reason to dread my sons' return."

Braun felt a cord tighten round his throat : " If there are not forty of us who will go with you, men, women, children, and truckle-beds, I go back as a tier to the spinning-mill."

" I can go back there without waiting," the inward Braun replied incontinently. " And the strangest thing of all is that she has not done it on purpose ! "

For, to the great indignation of this inward Braun, the other, the diplomat deputed to receive information, sets himself meekly to accept the offered sop.

" Why don't you come out and take a turn in Buschendorf, Monsieur Hippolyte ? No fear of meeting a Prussian ; that lot go to bed before the fowls. A little stroll would do you more good, upon my word, than sitting here poisoning your blood. You would see that even at this time of night, there are still lighted candles in the town. A candle, that may be lighting honest folk. So, you suppose that we would have allowed you to leave the place without drum and fife ? We don't buy the same bread with German money as with French. Some *Preuss* or other may come here ; if he wants labour, he will have to bring it with him. We have never

made anything but Simler cloth, and Simler cloth is French cloth. There is old Hermann who has sold his four silver spoons and forks, there are Gottlieb and his wife who have pawned their furniture, there is Pouppelé who has bought a thick coat and fur goloshes for his boy, there is Mayer who never leaves the station, so as to be the first to see *them* alight from the train, there are, all along the Hauptgasse, as many faces at the windows as there are Baumanns, Hausers, Kapps, Zellers, Francks—all because it is nearly ten o'clock, at ten o'clock there is still a train from Mulhouse, and no one must be the last to pack up his traps, if the young gentlemen come to bid us boot and saddle. It is mobilisation day, for us. The war may perhaps be over, in one sense ; in the other, it is only beginning. And I who was born an Alsatian in Alsace, I swear to you that I will never breathe easily until we have, saving your presence, b——d out of this country."

" Upon my word, it would never have occurred to them ! " incontinently observes the inward Braun. Sarah's lip begins to tremble ; she holds out her hand. But already Myrtil has undertaken to conclude the discussion with a manly utterance : he turns towards his brother his three-decker profile :

" After all, you agree that it will not take us long to start work again."

And Braun realises once again that, in the presence of a Simler, every man, small or great, appears as a child.

VIII

It was not for want of imagining the thousand different forms which her sons' return might take ; but when, at that very moment, the door-handle began silently to rotate, and, borrowing the tone of a familiar voice, said :

"It is I ; what is the matter ? " Sarah's eyes fastened themselves upon it, and her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth.

The door opened without a creak of its hinges. The battered end of a leather travelling-bag appeared first of all. A sigh was heard. The four men then became aware (Wilhelm was the first, and Fritz Braun the second to notice) that something was happening. And Guillaume Simler was in the room, followed immediately by Joseph, while afar off there sounded the belated baying of a dog.

" Humph ! Good evening."

It is better to pass over the incidents of the next few minutes. The licence that motherhood allowed itself, and the disregard that two great, grimy men showed for their own dignity, are not subjects which it is seemly to examine in detail.

Wilhelm expended a satisfaction sufficient to support the whole life of an uncle in exclamations such as : " The boys ! The scamps ! " Meanwhile Myrtil, who was ill prepared for this unexpected change in the situation, extended in the direction of the window the penthouse of his brows, and imperiously summoned Fritz Braun to explain to him by what witchcraft the gravel on the path had not crunched under the boots of the two travellers.

" Where ? Where ? " Wilhelm questioned in an undertone, pressing the hand of each nephew in turn. But neither of them thought fit to answer him.

However it may have been, each of them began to feel that displays of affection, even when they are extravagantly prolonged, are not sufficient to settle all the difficulties of industrial life. Failing any other reminder, Hippolyte's presence would promptly have dried the spring of such noble effusions.

He had not greeted the entry of his sons with any apparent gesture ; for one cannot so describe a change in his

colour, which from a brick red had passed to a greyish yellow that was by no means reassuring. At most, his mouth twitched without emitting a sound, and his swollen forefinger rose jerkily to point at the newcomers.

The hoarse pant of an uneasy bull was his way of entering into conversation ; it had the immediate effect of producing silence. Guillaume had finished soiling a handkerchief by mopping his brow ; he advanced towards the table :

" Good evening, Father."

" Eh ? " said his father. This was not what he had expected. His son's voice returned to that sort of nervous bark with which he had spoken two days before, to the faint-hearted agent.

" Father, we bring you news ! "

" Eh ? " his father repeated ; but the tone was no longer the same. Joseph slipped his spectacles over his ears ; he came to his brother's rescue, but thought it wiser to adopt the roundabout method of joviality :

" It is to Monsieur Hippolyte Simler, weaver of textiles at Vendeuvre that . . ."

" Where ? " came a stifled cry from the old man's throat.

" At Vendeuvre, in . . . the West, Father," Guillaume supported his brother, devouring their father with his gaze.

" Vendeuvre ? "

" Vendeuvre ! "

Myrtil's exclamation killed the triumphant tone of Wilhelm Blum.

" I knew it, I knew it ! " Myrtil went on, in an accent of despair, and struck the table with the palm of his hand. Hippolyte leaned forward :

" It is *there, there* that . . . ? "

Guillaume nodded his head in assent. Joseph, trusting in his tactics, adjusted his spectacles and, bowing again :

" . . . weaver of textiles, at Vendeuvre, and proprie——" He did not finish the word. His father had risen to his feet. The chair, flung backward, crashed to the ground, and held up in the lamplight its broken seat, flanked by four revolving wheels. The old man dominated his family by the altitude of his head :

" You have bou-ought ? "

" Brrrrm ! "

" We have . . . bought," replied Guillaume's bloodless lips ; his eyes remained glued to his father's. He was on the point of extracting the stamped document from his breast-pocket, when Joseph's hand cut him short.

" Had no time to consult you by telegram. We had to . . . had to make up our minds on the spot. If it had to be done again, we . . . I swear to you ! "

When the barrister turns towards the public benches, it is not a good omen for his case. Joseph called to witness the circle of eager eyes that surrounded him.

" It wanted . . ." said Myrtil.

" You have bou . . . ought ? " the manufacturer cried once again. Then the supreme question issued from his lips, after making his whiskers quiver :

" For how much ? "

" Calm yourself, Papa ; we have not betrayed your interests. We are certain that we have acted for the best," said Joseph, in what he hoped was a suitably filial tone.

" Let us take everything in order. We set off to look for a factory. That was your intention, wasn't it ? " corroborated Guillaume. Joseph leaned with an all too plain anxiety over the black leather travelling bag : " Look at these plans first of all, and tell us what price you would have offered for this business."

" A unique opportunity, Uncle Wilhelm," said Guillaume, proving that their uncle's presence might be of some advantage. But their father's logic was not one of those masses

which, once dislodged, can be turned from their course by the sweep of a hand :

" For how much, bought ? "

" You shall know in a moment, just look at these plans first," replied Joseph in a business-like tone.

" Answer him," murmured their mother. But the rage of the head of the house had already exceeded all bounds. He ranged the room with his gaze, gave vent to a fierce snort, and, his neck swelling until it became crimson, shouted, punctuating each syllable with a blow of his fist :

" For how much did you buy ? "

Everything that was capable of shaking shook, glass and metal alike. Guillaume stood in front of him, rigid and empty as a swordless sheath. After two or three futile quiverings of his lip, he succeeded in giving utterance to the sounds that were required to form the words, the enormity of which had thus full time to become apparent, wholly and severally : " Two hundred and ten thousand francs."

He said actually : "*frangx.*"

" Hippolyte ! " cried Sarah, hastening toward her husband.

Gazing at his brother with protruding eyes, in which there was no trace left of humanity, the weaver repeated :

" *Zwei Hundert . . . Gott im Himmel . . . Myrtil . . . alles, alles . . .* " then, his legs giving way, he stepped backwards, tried to sit down, collided with one of the legs of the overturned chair, and fell in the gap between it and the table, emitting the long roar of the bull that has received its deathblow.

IX

PEOPLE DO NOT ALWAYS DIE WHEN THEY WISH. THE " HIPPOpotamus," as the Altermann clan dubbed him—but for that

matter the Altermanns were themselves of mixed blood, *yid* and *goy*—had a carcass that would last a century.

" It will let the blood out. He was getting too fat," had been Friedrich Altermann's conclusion, as he prodded his porcelain pipe. The Altermanns opted *preuss*. A competitor the less and a debt on the competitor's balance-sheet made this morose man quite cheerful.

A bed had been hastily prepared in the sitting-room. But " a Simler and a bed do not stay long together " was an expression frequently uttered, for his own personal satisfaction, by the grandfather, *selig*, Mosche Hersch Simler, the former drum-major of the Grand Army.

Thirty hours later, the old man's step was sounding from top to bottom of the house, and the heavy *fuffuffuff* of his breath passed unexpectedly through the shut doors.

This stroke, which would have turned any other man into a lifeless corpse, had barely affected his left eyelid. And if, during the week that followed, he had articulated his words with difficulty, this symptom appeared of slight importance compared with the reactions furnished by his character.

" The hippopotamus is furious. Take care ! " sneered Altermann, who had listened to the rumours that were current. Their gardens adjoined. And cousin Jacob Stern came and went between his gate and the Simlers', repeating in a despairing tone :

" Why did nobody listen to Sarah Simler ? Women understand these things. Hippolyte will die rather than take the train ! "

In the meantime, it was Hippolyte who was killing them, and quickly. Joseph caught him by the sleeve, as he passed the door of the room ; his voice would have cooled a furnace : " Papa, come and look ! "

The blue gelatine of the plans was glazing the surface of a table. The father released himself stiffly, and continued

on his way. The first words that he could bring himself to utter were :

" You say two hundred and ten thousand ? "

" Two . . . ? Y-es ! "

" Then that is more than I possess. Then I won't pay it."

And he had gone on his way. For three whole days, they had got nothing more out of him than : " I won't pay it. I won't pay a cent."

But by dint of travelling we end by acquiring wisdom. Three days and nights spent in wandering and panting brought him at length into the dining-room early one afternoon.

The hair had sprouted on his chin and round his lips. The grey hair of his whiskers was bristling ; his bushy eyebrows were tumbling untidily over the bloodshot globes of his eyes, one of which, the left eye, remained half shut. The hair that remained on his scalp, of a steely grey, straggled across his head, from ear to ear, and was mingled with the fluff of the cushions upon which he had slept. His collar dangled on either side of his heavy dewlap. His frock coat of brown cloth, threadbare, buttoned in the wrong holes, encased with deep wrinkles his chest and abdomen. He was obviously worn out. But an expression of inexpiable rancour fought against his exhaustion.

The July heat penetrated the house with a heavy throb. Assembled behind closed shutters, the family discussed matters quietly, their ears alert for the master's coming.

His sudden arrival plunged them in confusion. Sarah, who had been on her feet since the evening when the armchair had collapsed, ran to meet him. He withdrew. She managed, nevertheless, to seize hold of the brown velvet collar of his coat, which was turned up. There was no point in making any preliminary speech.

" We were waiting for you," said the cripple simply, still

wearing his soft hat. The affectionate smile that accompanied this speech was wasted.

" *Nichts !* I won't pay a cent ! " uttered the thick voice, out of the darkness. Cousin Jacob Stern, who was in the room, said :

" Good ! Seeing costs nothing. Look at the plans first, you can think about them afterwards."

One (or the other) of the sons added : " We are ready to tell you everything, Father."

" Let me see them then, at once. Since I must after all know the worst. . . . "

Somebody went to open the shutters. But Sarah shut the window again, where, without losing a moment, the wasps were beginning to hum their interminable scales in a minor key.

It was a hammer-and-tongs discussion. The sons, in their desperation, mingled in a confusion in which everyone, at first, seemed inclined to go astray, the pinchbeck rings of the agent, the porter's lodge, with interminable weaving-rooms, heroically suspended from the beams of their ceilings, and flooded with a dazzling glare of toil, and a certain wall that had been too short and had suddenly become long enough by favour of a dancing figure in a brown suit.

Joseph had to interpose his footrule between them and this chaos. Heads were bowed over the plans. A voice then spoke of figures, capital, interest, dates of payment, instalments, fractional payments, labour, area, and possible markets. The footrule slid wildly over the plans. Moist forefingers followed the white outlines from corner to corner.

Uncle Blum accompanied with a steadily intensified : " Good ! Good ! " the building up of a future in which one saw liabilities convert themselves automatically into assets, and the initial debt make all the more dazzling a triumph that was assured from the start.

If the native of Alsace is habitually calm, if he is not master of a very extensive vocabulary, he holds in reserve an accent which gives his words their full meaning, and other meanings as well ; and he is capable of becoming heated, internally, to a temperature which transforms him, when the occasion arises, into a regular devil.

Whence it occurred that, within the limits of precise sums, and beyond those limits, there arose, among these five men, a dream which no longer shared any common measure with their calculations.

However, from having, willy-nilly, played too extensively with gold, one section of Israel has acquired, in this connection, an intransigence compared with which their ordinary scruples would appear singularly flexible. The Simlers, failing other civic virtues, had transmitted this horror of gambling from father to son, through an untold number of generations.

Guillaume chewed his moustache as he listened to his brother's explanation. He now disowned, with all the force of his blood, this foolish prank for which he was more than half responsible. He remained silent, but did not fail to observe any of the waves of feeling that were passing through his father. The sense of his resemblance to that man, so little loved, to whom no other tie attached him, increased his horror at himself and at life. He waited for the unjust to utter the cry which the just should have uttered.

Hippolyte did not keep him waiting long.

" Very good. Now take away all this stuff."

" Hippolyte ! " Sarah could not help exclaiming. Their cousin Jacob Stern hesitated ; he could not tear his eyes from the papers. He repeated :

" Not so bad, this business ! "

" There, Papa ! " said the helpless Joseph, with a trace of sharpness. Hippolyte, who had turned away, swung round

to face him. It was the first time that he had felt sufficient command of himself to be able to look one of his sons in the eyes.

" Listen, this is my last word, my son. You insist, and you are wrong. There is one thing, however, which I wish to tell you : my factory is worth, in buildings and plant—the plant is old—from sixty to seventy thousand ; I shall sell it for forty thousand, if not thirty. Goods in the warehouse and with tradesmen, eight thousand, which makes forty-five. Money due to me, three or four thousand, which makes forty-eight thousand five hundred. Due by me to sundry contractors, two thousand eight hundred, which makes forty-six thousand. The house and garden, twenty-five thousand before the war, twelve thousand to-day, which makes fifty-eight thousand. In the bank, Myrtil's fortune, Sarah's and Hippolyte's " (here a tremor in the voice, and a pause) " eighty-five thousand, which makes —ah !—which makes one hundred and forty-three thousand, roughly one hundred and forty-five or one hundred and forty, which, subtracted from two hundred and ten, leaves a balance of seventy thousand francs. I possessed one hundred and forty-three thousand francs when I let you go away with your brother, and you expect me to owe seventy thousand when you return ? "

The " *I* possessed " was listened to by the family with a respectful terror. It embodied the mystery of the trinity formed by the two brothers and the wife of one of them. But one could not deny that old Simler had the merit of being able to put a question upon its proper footing. He had already gone on, in a tone which automatically swelled :

" If one of my family has ever borrowed money, it has been to preserve his life and to continue. But to fling money away for pleasure and beg to recover it, none of us has ever done. When all is said, which of us here is the madman ? *Wer ist der Narr ?* To leave this place, I have decided.

To let my sons go ahead, I have agreed. To sign the paper, that also. But, listen to me, Joseph ! . . ."

Scorn furrowed his lips, as the sea is furrowed by the wake of a steamer proceeding at full speed. And what he next said did indeed deserve careful attention.

There was this, first of all, that Simler was a factory, but it was also a name, and an honoured name ; and Dollfuss could not mean anything more. Then it appeared that Simler meant more things than had been supposed : for it was at once a power which asked nothing of anyone, helped its co-religionists, paid in full before the stipulated date, and was worth a million when it wrote to the local managers of the Bank, with respect to someone or other : " This is an honest man ; allow him credit ; I, Simler of Buschendorf (Haut-Rhin), guarantee his solvency."

And Simler appeared in aspects more and more varied and more and more stormy : in fact, spreading itself without fear or restraint, it presently included (apart from Myrtil) the sainted mother of two unworthy sons, the memory of a series of manufacturers piously deceased after serious and harassed lives,—even entities that were more abstract, such as orders for wool, sales of cloth, the wage-bill upon which (virtually) Buschendorf existed,—in short everything that, nearly or remotely, concerned a little factory of white stone hidden among chestnut-trees.

The guttural intonations of the head of the family penetrated the heart of the silence, like so many wooden wedges. His audience learned without transition that the brow of man might serve to bear the blush of shame, but that it did not rest with the old man's brow to begin—that the adult has more wisdom, but children a greater frankness than had been shown by the two Simler sons.

Finally at the moment in which a raucous syllable, closely akin to the word *ruin*, was struggling between Hippolyte's whiskers and endeavouring to pass the half-blocked

threshold of his lips, the tornado, which the more circumspect had discerned in the distance, arose and overwhelmed them.

It was no longer a manufacturer in dispute, nor a father lecturing his sons. It was an old man who stalked sneering about the room, crushing the floor with his weight, and stiffening, in the enormous sheath of his check trousers, his legs swollen by gout. It was a frenzied colossus, defending what he supposed to be his life, and charging blindfold into the ranks of his enemies.

" Bought ? Bought ? By what right ? Answer me ! I wash my hands of you ! Go away ! The power of attorney,—what was there in the power of attorney ? There was to *lease*, not to *buy* ! Go away ! You are nothing to me any more ! I remain here ; I shall be a Prussian who pays, not a Frenchman who goes bankrupt ! If I chose—do you hear me ?—it would be the courts for you, for all of you, you included, Blum ! I have only to raise my hand. Go away ! You are . . . *Chanef !* You are . . . Myrtil, rrrr ! Myrtil ! "

Myrtil took the stage. His three-decker head, vigorously supported by the vice-like grip of his jaw and the pillory of his cravat, announced to all present that its owner was not lacking in resolution.

The Hippopotamus gripped him by the arm. The brotherhood of the two men was obvious even in their dissimilarities. Myrtil felt the swollen drumsticks of his brother's fingers grip his arm in jerks. He cast his keen, judicial stare at his relatives. He saw Guillaume, filled with more horror than a man can contain, his lip and chin flapping like eyelids, his body trembling from head to foot, by dint of feeling his own logic agree with that of the unjust parent. Joseph, on the other side of the table, the light of the Criminal Court glowing in his eyes, was carefully fastening his gaze upon a corner of the sideboard, and compressing his anger to bursting-point, behind the dam of a footrule. Sarah

stood apart in silence, knowing that this was not her hour.

" What is to be done ? " Myrtil finally asked—a question that was, to say the least, superfluous.

It was then that little Blum showed his sublimity. He was conscious of it at once, and was conscious of it again in time to come. If ever anyone, in after years, had been anxious to collect the details of his biography, he would have admitted it without modesty, and would perhaps have added more than one advantageous detail.

His eyes illuminated by a sort of heavenly certainty, and the smile with which he began to speak, proved his self-confidence. He began in a low tone which, however, grew steadily clearer and ended by reaching heights that are rarely attained by those who remain, to the end of their lives, the brothers-in-law of the strong men of this world. One learned that day (to forget it the day after) that the clubfoot had not lived in vain, and that in the matter of human sagacity he could give points to the Receiver of the Paris Stock Exchange, who is, as everyone knows, the most profound diplomat in the Western world.

The fact remains that before the company had had time to turn round, little Blum had set upon their feet Weaving, Traffic, Trade and Credit, and was beginning to play, with those forces, an impressive game of puss-in-the-corner.

He was not to prevail for long, and it was better so. For his theme, when regarded as a whole, was dangerous ; he affirmed this, that Debt is the death of individuals and the life of business ; and this, that Credit ruins man and maintains Society ; moreover this, that nothing clogs the wheels of an industry so much as the stagnation of its own funds ; that an industry begins to work only when it appeals for money from outside ; that to maintain a capital of one hundred and forty thousand francs with a factory costing two hundred and ten thousand is better than to have to support a capital of two hundred thousand with a business which

cannot be liquidated for more than one hundred thousand ; in short, he outlined in so few words so complete a theory of what has since been named under-capitalisation, that, himself the first to take alarm, he beat a retreat.

Quietly, with a smiling and candid toss of his head, he reassured his hearers. He passed over the " Buts ! ", " Look heres ! " and sniffs of the two Simlers, and set off coolly in a direction slightly different from that which he had begun by taking.

This was his culminating point. A too rigorous demonstration would have alarmed them. He drew his listeners into the maze of his dialectic, and led them so effectively astray that it became impossible for them ever to return to their starting-point.

He admitted that the sons had exceeded their rights ; but it had been in order to derive from the situation without delay an unexpected advantage. Seventy thousand francs, to be paid in fifteen annual instalments, was not to be compared with an annual rent of fifteen thousand. The only thing was, how to procure the fresh supply of liquid cash. Little Blum abolished in an instant all the distance between himself and the Supreme Magistrature of the Provisional Government. There was as yet no question of the law, enacted shortly afterwards, under which the Republic advanced to the natives of Alsace-Lorraine who had opted for France, free of interest, the sums necessary for their transplantation. The little cloth-merchant improvised it, drafted it, voted it with an unfaltering intrepidity. He broke into the columns of the estimates drawn up by the imagination of Joseph, multiplied his nephew's figures by the power of the Simlers' industry and the square of their spirit of initiative, turned the totals inside out, and installed his own hypotheses upon the tottering column of decimals.

No one had ever heard the clubfoot speak for so long without stopping. No one was ever to hear him again. But

his voice was already subdued by alarm in the presence of the general surprise and attention. His final sentences were drowned in a murmur of comment. Of the heroic Blum, there remained only that sort of celestial smile upon his face, and the gesture of fundamental conviction with which he threw out his arms on either side of his nondescript grey coat.

Otherwise, there was now only the ordinary Blum whose appearance bore witness to an absolute incapacity to enrich himself by any one of the methods which he had just been expounding in theory.

" Hippolyte, I fail to understand you ; it is quite simple," said Abraham Stern, from the midst of the little pink wrinkles which covered his face like a sieve.

" Simple to you, perhaps, Afroum," replied Myrtil. But Afroum did not abandon his placidity as he answered him over the top of his spectacles : " I do not see what you mean by that. I have given up my office at Turckheim, I will not be notary to the King of Prussia, but the indemnity that was due to me from the Prussians has been diminished by one-third on account of my option, and I shall not find a practice at that price in France. My Lambert was killed at Gravelotte. Only Benjamin is left to me ; he cannot return into occupied territory, he is waiting for me in Paris, without any means of livelihood. I do not know what is to become of me. I find that simple, as you say, Myrtil. But I do not consider that your situation is more embarrassing than my own, nor that your nephews' proposal deserves so little attention. The time has come, don't you see, my dear friends, to find everything simple, because, if we consented, any of us, to look at things as they really are, there would be nothing left for us but to sit down and weep until we die."

His smooth, legal lips closed in time to suppress a comical little hiccough. His brother Jacob added :

" When it is not by hatred that we are cast out, it is by love that we are obliged to go."

He rose with as great an effort as though it had been a question of setting forth, at that very moment, towards an unknown destiny. As he passed by Hippolyte, and a little behind him, he patted him on the arm, and added in a tone of reflection : " Pull yourself together, my good Hippolyte. You are going away with your family. I, if I had not him . . ."

And the widower could do no more than point, with his hand, to his brother the lawyer, who, his eyes starting out of his head, seemed to be lost in some perennial dream.

Hippolyte had looked on without moving a muscle at the conclusion of this scene. He then made a half-turn, left the room, and, when Sarah had joined him, the house was filled, for hours on end, with a long sobbing groan, to which responded, at intervals, murmurings of an indescribable tenderness.

As this day ended, a sense of peace and calm stole into the houses of Buschendorf. The candle kept watch in more than one window, as had been the custom for many weeks past. But it shed its light, everywhere almost, upon a strange scene of activity. Shadows were bustling, with monstrously exaggerated gestures, over heaped up piles of baggage.

And since there is more in man than the hope of gain, for the first time in fully a year, the sound of Joseph's flute rose in the night. He was playing by himself, in the dark, in his bedroom beneath the sloping roof.

His window was open ; the notes emerged timidly at first ; then they became continuous like hesitating dancers who have joined hands ; they formed a line which swayed, seemed to sink, recovered itself, and moved onward, beating time with a martial tread. It was no longer a line, but a garland. It wove and unwove itself in successive figures. The pure,

naked sound gathered strength. It combined with the rustling of the sorb-trees in the garden, caught up everything that was alive in the darkness without, and drew it into its harmony. It was the abnormal brilliance of Venus, the ruddy glow of Mars, the silent activity of the Great Bear, the twinkling of Fomalhaut upon the rounded horizon, the water of the little dark river passing over the gravel of its bed, and the breeze that slipped among the osiers of its banks.

Joseph's flute was now audible from one end of the village to the other.

" He can play with a glad heart, to-night, the dear boy," said a young woman in Fritz Braun's house, as she paused from her task of emptying a cupboard of its piles of lavender-scented linen.

All the air was trembling with it. The coolness of the night made one with the far-off strain of the instrument. Bosoms swelled, here and there, eyes flooded certain faces with tears which were drunk by quivering lips.

But, as indifferent to these griefs which it relieved of their burden as to the over-excited mirth which it transformed into quiet meditations, the music continued on its way, as though its sole anxiety were to realise consciously an inward perfection. The soul of the artist was manifested only by the loyal practice of his art. No one could ask for more. Simplicity and emotion were the only qualities fitted to exalt the contradictory passions of all those whom this summer night found awake.

Joseph's flute, the last voice to be heard in that valley, sounded thus for more than one person whom the player would never know. It sounded ummistakably also for those very strange depths which were Joseph's own soul, which life was endeavouring to submerge.

And because, indeed, money-making is not the only thing on this earth, Guillaume Simler, at the same hour, had set

out in order to experience once again, in the company of a young woman whose fair complexion had already begun to fade, the horror that he felt of himself and of life.

She was waiting for him in the house of Aunt Babette, Uncle William's wife. This was eight miles away, in the outskirts of Colmar. He reached the place about midnight. And at the first glance, he knew. He wished that he had never come back. He longed for a violent shattering of everything in some universal catastrophe.

His wife was standing beneath the solitary lamp that lighted the little station ; a child was tugging at each of her hands. She was slight, without delicacy of form. She was smiling, with her perpetual, slightly forced smile, which engraved itself upon the fragile tissue of her skin. She was smiling already, before she had caught sight of her husband, because she was on the watch, because the darkness was a strain upon her docile attention, but chiefly because she went through life like an obedient, well brought-up schoolgirl.

Nevertheless she was moved. If it had occurred to Guillaume to place his hand upon his wife's bodice, he would have felt a rapid pulsation against his palm. But no such idea occurred to him. Besides, it was not with emotion that Hermine was smiling.

He kissed his wife upon both cheeks, stooped down to the children—a boy and a girl—and fumbled for a moment with his moustache, to reach a little face that hid itself against his shoulder. They came out upon the road ; he kept on repeating :

" How are you ? How are you ? All well, eh ? Eh ? Not in bed yet ? Aren't you cold ? "

Aunt Babette had tactfully retired before Guillaume's arrival. The table groaned beneath the weight of the *Kugelhopf*, the *Schnitte*, the saveloys, and one gigantic *Kugel* that was still steaming. Guillaume scarcely gave a glance

at these preparations which the children, suddenly wide awake, were devouring with their eyes. He ordered Hermine to put them to bed at once. Then she had to be content with a far too succinct account of his adventures. Leaning towards him, she drank in his detached words, unable to quicken their flow. He avoided her eye.

They found themselves presently side by side in the narrow bed. Her fine golden hair, neatly braided, lay along her shoulders, without his thinking of disturbing it, or her remembering that he had the right to do so. He brushed her forehead with a kiss. She kissed him on the cheek. And he fell asleep, leaving her to turn from side to side remembering each of the words that he had said to her.

He did not hate his wife. He had never wished to marry any other woman. He was one of those men who carry in their bones the curse of the bone, in their flesh the curse of the flesh. He was not a brute, far from it. Music made him cry. He knew several good stories, and would tell them when he was in the mood. But he was always of the race that set Job upon his dunghill. With this difference, that a palace would have brought him no more peace than the dunghill of the Elect. People said :

" The Simlers are all workers, but Monsieur Guillaume is a perfect devil for work. You would think that his only pleasure in life is to kill himself."

It was the bare truth ; only he had never allowed himself time to think about his horror of life. He diverted to his work the instinct which, had he let it come to light, would have led him to hang himself with two feet of rope from the stoutest branch of the big chestnut-tree at the factory. And life, which knows how to make use of everything in preparing its own ultimate triumph, drew from this splenetic creature an output of work calculated to discourage the blithest human machines.

Joseph's flute furnished, in its own fashion, eight miles

away, the reply to Guillaume's disgust with life. Different causes, identical results. Did the Cercle du Commerce at Vendeuvre suspect this ? For, in unconscious obedience to obscure laws, men of the Simler quality are incapable of creating anything that will last.

X

" For heaven's sake, Pierrotin, your window ! "

Thirty gentlemen of good position are engaged in feeling the comfort, external and internal, of not being out of doors. Between the world indoors and that outside, the plate glass windows interpose their thin but vigilant frontier.

When the open fires, vigorously stirred, spread their comfortable message through the rooms, it is pleasant to look on at the fight that is being waged between Vendeuvre and the fog. And the chink of gold coins, supported *stringendo* by the whistle of the gas-jets in the lustres, creates a symphony that is full of charm for men who have toiled all day long in the service of lucre.

But, through the half-open window, sounds have penetrated which are not of the sort admitted into Clubs : there is first of all the interminable weeping of one of those autumnal drizzles, of which the west of France possesses the secret ; there is also the clatter of looms at work. This is why the Club exclaims as one man : " For heaven's sake, Pierrotin ! "

The unfortunate Pierrotin does not wait to be scolded a second time ; he hastens to shut the window.

Do you want to find out whether a house is well built ? Shut one of its windows. If the two halves, plump and solid in the hand, dovetail into one another with the compliance of a well-oiled machine, it means that the architect has not scamped his work, and that the workmen have done theirs to perfection

Pierrotin pushes the window to without the slightest rattling of a pane in its bed of putty. The long curtains are only awaiting this act before straightening out the folds of their red damask. October may now streak the chalky pallor of the sky with its squalls, or bury the patient town in its mists, there is no fear that any breath of air will shake the gilded bobbins of their fringes. The lords of the local industry are under shelter, and they know it.

" A fine day for moving in," puts in young Pautauberge, expressing what is in all their minds.

" Has anyone seen them ? " inquires an old man from the depths of his armchair.

" Little Boulinier has just come in. It will be strange if he doesn't know something. Boulinier ! My dear Boulinier ! "

Boulinier enters the room, his moustache a sponge, with purple slabs of cold on his cheeks.

" Behold our worthy colleague, full to overflowing, I wager, with all the gossip," announces Lefombère (of Chevalier-Lefombère, weavers).

" Boulinier, you are all impatience, my good fellow, we are listening," exclaims Morindet (of Morindet & Co., shirt-makers), his legs crossed in front of the fire in the grate.

" Have your friends arrived, dear Monsieur Boulinier ? " deigns to articulate, from the depths of his armchair, the old man who has spoken before. Boulinier has never yet been so highly honoured.

" Ah ! Monsier de Rauglandre, to which friends do you refer ? "

" The rascal is shamming stupid to take us in," murmurs young Pautauberge in a tone of disgust. His father has made his million out of army contracts ; he despises fortunes that are still in course of formation.

" Come now, Boulinier ! " cries M. des Challeries, from the card-room beyond, " you were seen, not three hours ago, arm in arm with your Alsatians."

Boulinier turns to face the speaker, with a disarming good nature : " Ah ! Monsieur des Challeries, how we envy you who have never had to take under your arm anything in the nature of an order or a contract."

" This damned Boulinier is warming up his customer."

" The cookery of commerce," the merchant replies humbly.

But M. de Rauglandre is persistent. He lies buried in his armchair, his cheeks roasted by the heat of the log-fire, and holds up a glass of chartreuse against the shifting background of the flames.

" *Dear* Monsieur Boulinier, are your friends in good health ? "

Boulinier is not so easily brought to the end of his tether. The round stone rolls, the flat stone slides. He knows the proverb. Outwardly round, inwardly flat, he pushes ahead by any means in his power.

" Ah ! Any man who sells, buys and pays is my friend."

" And you think that they will pay ? "

" What is one to expect of these people ? "

" What are they like ? Tell us, des Challeries, you assure us that you saw the tribe ? "

" Gipsies on the move ! " replied M. des Challeries, from where he is sitting.

The Club exclaims :

" And then ? "

" And then ? Imagine it . . ." And M. des Challeries makes an unexpected appearance. His tall figure fills the doorway : " Imagine it : a tribe of people from heaven knows where, with long teeth, and noses, and skirts of black cloth covered in mud to their waists. At the head, treading in the puddles, our great idiot Gabard, under a cotton umbrella, with a stream of water splashing off his stomach ; he led the procession with the air of a circus-hand going to put his performing dogs in their kennel, who feels his hair glued to

his head, and foresees an empty house that night. On his heels, a troop of bowed backs. I had spotted my Israelites. I stopped on the pavement to watch the procession pass. First of all, sharing an umbrella, a stout one and a lean one, following in Gabard's paces, and splashing one another with a marvellous disregard of fortuitous circumstances. Leather bags and carpet bags dangled from their forepaws ; they kept catching them between their legs, and made me think of funeral mutes trying to play football with their knees.

" A little way behind them, two important looking parties whom I guessed to be the father with his younger brother, the master, our new colleagues, gentlemen, nothing less than the two Simlers senior, think of that, the fine flower of Rhineland business, the very best type of what they have been turning out, ever since the Revolution of Eighty-nine, in the ghettos of Frankfurt, the first fruits of M. Thiers's Government, a pretty German warp on a Jewish weft, one of those reversible stuffs, don't you know, usury on one side, swindling on the other, with a broad selvage of meanness, stuffs that look well enough, I don't deny, smooth to the touch, that take in the purchaser, but the expert can detect for certain the end of all honest and conscientious work. Hum ! You would not have liked me not to make a proper introduction of the strange clique whom we see entering into possession of our poor Poncet's leavings."

A murmur of approval greets this emphatic speech, which Boulinier has not ceased to interpret, word by word, in his attitudes. M. des Challeries has made his way to the chimneypiece, where Lefombère has made room for him. Even when M. des Challeries speaks from his full face, he always seems to be speaking over his shoulder. His words have to overcome, before emerging from under his bristling moustache, a slight hesitation of his upper lip. His speech derives from this an aristocratic nonchalance, the disdain of which is intensified by the silent domination of his monocle. It is

all very well, his mocking at over-prominent noses : his own yields pride of place to none ; but one thinks, when one looks at it, only of an eagle's beak.

" Of the two elders, I cannot tell you much. They were hidden from me by their umbrellas. But our friend Boulinier, who was trotting familiarly between them, will perhaps be able to enlighten us."

Whereupon Boulinier exclaims, rubbing his hands together with an ineffable satisfaction : " Oh, oh, oh, oh ! You speak like Saint-Simon" (this is M. des Challeries's foible), " but why on earth paint so black a picture where I see nothing but four poor, honest men ? Gabard ? Gabard is a fool ; it is possible that they have got round him. But a baby six months old could get round Gabard."

" You do not explain to us why you were trotting, Boulinier ! " a voice insists.

" Trotting, oh, very well, that is perhaps my natural gait, I shall not venture to question the incomparable description given us by Monsieur des Challeries ; but how do you expect my fat body to walk between two fellows as tall as that, who wouldn't even do me the kindness to shorten their pace ? "

" Familiarly ! You were trotting familiarly, Boulinier ; do not evade the point ! "

" It is untrue, gentlemen. Here our Vendevoriate Saint-Simon's description has attempted the impossible. I place in the hands of our valued secretary Pierrotin a louis of twenty francs, with instructions to hand it over to the first person who is able to boast of any sort of familiarity with either of the two elder Simlers. The young ones are positive spaniels in comparison. Rocks, gentlemen, rocks without a smile. I don't know whether they are all like that in their country, but if anyone can get a civil word out of them, I forfeit my stake, and Boulinier is Boulinier no more."

" I say then, your protégés are no longer so friendly as you made out."

" If they were what you suppose, would they allow anyone to protect them ? Humph ! We are dealing with the hardest heads in French textiles ; they see no need to impose upon us with melodrama. The barking dog doesn't bite."

" But sharp teeth need strong muzzles. I don't like the sound of these newcomers," opines the stout Huillery (weaving), in a voice that fails to succeed in seeming calm. M. de Rauglandre intervenes once more ; his little brick and copper face continues to reflect the fire of logs : " Go on, my dear fellow ; your description was amusing."

" The women, Sir, tell us about the women ! " adds young Pautauberge. Des Challeries proceeds, but first of all rewards Boulinier for having tickled his vanity : " Let us then withdraw all familiarity from your trot, my friend ; I shall still prefer your French step to the heavy tread of that Bavarian artillery."

" My dear fellow ! I am afraid you are going a little too far. There is a considerable distance between Alsace and Bavaria, in any case there is the Rhine between them and a recent treaty, which I should prefer not to see you ratify so light-heartedly."

This objection has been made, in a tone which lacks neither calm nor a certain pedantic complacency, by someone who is entirely hidden by the back of an armchair of English leather. The vivacity with which des Challeries answers him proves that the objector is of greater importance than might be supposed.

" Ah, my dear Sir, I draw every proper distinction between the Frenchmen of Alsace and—certain colonials in the frontier zone. To my mind, France will never cease to extend to the Rhine. But, within that frontier established by nature and by the law of nations, you will never prevent me from distinguishing between my compatriots and those who

never at any moment, since the war or before it, have been my compatriots."

" You don't mean to say . . . "

" Allow me to continue, my dear Sir, the subject is worth discussing. Fifteen hundred thousand French citizens have become Germans. But even after they had sworn allegiance to the Emperor Wilhelm and paid the German levy, they would still remain for me true and authentic Frenchmen. I will indeed go farther ; of all the Alsatians and all the Lorrainers, the most French are those that have remained out there, to carry on the war after the war."

" Very well said, Monsieur des Challeries ! " exclaims someone, from the next room ; the sound of his voice falls with a curious effect upon the silence which prevails in the Club. M. des Challeries readjusts his monocle and proceeds slowly. " Among those who have abandoned their post of battle in the rearguard of our retreat,—the advanced guard of tomorrow, gentlemen, there are some who have their reasons. Peace be to their conscience. Let them come, we are ready to make room for them. . . . "

" Of course ! " comes at once from Huillery, whose opinion nobody has asked. At the same time a member of little influence mutters with sincerity :

" After all there is room elsewhere."

" But if you had witnessed like myself, my dear Sir," des Challeries continues, " the spectacle which the band of . . . of Simlers offered me this afternoon, you would agree that, among the flotsam which is coming to us from the annexed territories, there is, certainly, stuff worth taking, but there is also much that should be rejected."

The voice from the armchair of English leather rose again, with the same indolent, ironical, and slightly preaching inflection : " I do not question your description, my dear Sir. You may well be right. These Simlers, I do not know them. At the same time I would rather hear you decide as

you have decided, had chance furnished you already with some opportunities of exercising your power of analysis in the di cernment of genuine Frenchmen from Alsace. You are too quick to take offence. If you do not mean us to believe that you are afraid of the competition of these immigrants in your business, wait until you are inundated by others of their kind before quibbling about their status as Frenchmen. There is no longer an abundance of Frenchmen, alas, there-is-no-longer-an-abundance ! "

Before he has finished speaking, the general opinion begins to buzz uncertainly, but with evident regret : " True ; true ! "

" Is it you that speak thus, Monsieur Le Pleynier ? " retorts des Challeries, " you whose son nearly lost his life in trying to stop the rout of a battalion of militia ? It is not so much numbers that we lack as quality. And what quality, what French quality do these Simlers bring us ? Once again, Monsieur Le Pleynier, I wish that you had been present with myself at their entry into the town . . . "

" You have plenty of wit, you may continue your description, I assure you that we shall enjoy it," the mocking voice interrupts him.

" My dear Sir," exclaims M. des Challeries, half-flattered, half-offended, " it is a question not of wit, but of common sense and indignation. Anyhow, let them live. I do not deny the right to anyone. But as our neighbours and colleagues, no ! "

At this moment M. des Challeries utters a little nasal laugh, sharp and drawling, which banishes the Simler clique a hundred leagues from his moral or material boundaries. He then continues in a playful tone :

" Can you imagine Madame de Rauglandre, Madame Pommier, Madame Morindet, Madame Pierrotin, Madame des Challeries, receiving on their days Mesdames —ahem !—Simler, and going to return the civility in

their little parlour? Eh, you would not allow Mademoiselle Le Pleynier to call there, my friend! I am indeed losing my temper, but I have good reason. Anyone who had seen, as I saw, those bundles of old muddy shawls, draped round those soaked serges, those boots, those slimy parcels carried at arm's length, all those signs of a sordid rapacity, would not even ask what Vendeuvre can mean to these people, except a halting-place on their road. They are tramps, gentlemen, and nothing more. It is regrettable, I say it aloud, that they have managed to insinuate themselves into the Poncet works. But our duty is clearly indicated. Let them keep to themselves, and let us keep to ourselves. When they go, which will not be long, we shall cross ourselves, cross off their names, and continue as before. In the meantime, let us regard them as a foreign body that has found its way into our town, as though we were carrying a bullet in a wound."

From scorn or laziness, M. Le Pleynier remains silent. A stir at once follows in the rooms of the Club. It starts from the fireplace and spreads into the outer rooms. M. des Challeries watches with a satisfied eye his listeners disperse, leaving behind them a wake of sound. The speaker's peroration has given each of them an idea, even though it be not that which he intended: with regard to the Simlers, complete indifference, but a keen apprehension of the unknown, of irregularity, of the rain and of this misty autumn evening.

And M. des Challeries is left speechless when young Pautauberge, raising his boots, in the American fashion, to the level of his eyes, draws the secret conclusion from his remarks:

"To think that Lorilleux should have chosen a day like this to go shooting!"

Meanwhile the honest Boulinier remains standing, and rubs his hands with a disturbing perplexity.

"I see," he murmurs at length, but in a tone sharp enough

to attract general attention, " I see that it would be quite superfluous to repeat my little compliment."

Young Pautauberge mutters rudely : " What yarn is this damned Jesuit going to spin us now ? "

Boulinier continues, as though in a dream, studying upon the pattern of the carpet the marks left by his own boots : " These great simpletons imagine that they can get into our Club like grist into a mill."

Some of the others have gathered round him. Des Challeries, who has reached the threshold of the card-room, stops, without turning round. Then Boulinier grips his own left wrist, as though he were about to carry himself off to the police-station, shakes his imprisoned hand vigorously in the vice of his imprisoning hand, flings back his head and cries : " Can you imagine, my dear Pierrotin, the mission which those poor devils have asked me to undertake ? Apparently they only lack a seconder to have the impertinence to offer themselves for election here."

An uproar follows, in which loud laughter and contemptuous sniffs prevail. Pierrotin's raucous voice makes itself heard : " *But* as *no* seconder can be found . . . "

" You are mistaken, my dear Sir. If it can make any difference . . . "

Le Pleynier has risen from his chair, and makes his way calmly to a table on which there are a few matches with a striker.

First of all there has risen a sort of huge bony gourd, upon the surface of which the light of the lustres, abandoning the rest of the room, has begun to play. Then, framed in the flowing nobility of a pair of whiskers and a crown of white hair, is carved a face of bold architecture, dominated by the cliff of the forehead, polished, heavily overhanging, then, from the nose to the chin, by a wall of porphyry, barely cloven by the crack of his lips.

The Club may well be accustomed to his behaviour, when

M. Le Pleynier begins to move, the folds of an ample frock-coat flapping against his legs, the others cannot suppress a feeling of uneasiness. It is not so much due to his height ; but, from his stout boots and grey spats, to his high collar and legal cravat, there is not a detail of his dress that does not clearly indicate the old dandy, a past-master in contempt of transient fashions, and perfectly convinced of the authority of his own taste.

" If, that is to say, none of you gentlemen has any objection."

He has spoken with a gentle inclination of his head from right to left ; then he strikes a match with so delicate a precision that one cannot help looking at his clenched fist, which is half concealed by his sleeve.

However, these few gestures are enough to reveal different and less solemn features. We see, beneath the cornice of his brows, a pair of little pig's eyes sparkle, eyes placed too close together. We see that the nose itself is a clown's nose ; it has the prehensile protuberance, the fatness, the rascality.

We know now from where the ironical accent of the voice proceeds. To add to it, the somewhat too mottled vertical surface of the cheeks is hollowed by two dimples, while the mouth, half-opened, reveals a fleshy lower lip, rounded like a saucer, and full of mocking weakness. And we discover, at the same time, that if M. Le Pleynier's shoulders seem to overtop everyone's else, it is only a moral illusion. A mere matter of authority and bearing. If we study him closely, he has a long body with an exaggerated paunch. M. Le Pleynier's majesty then appears a very dubious majesty. It is all the more disconcerting for that. And the nasal voice penetrates with an incisive vigour, in which its own self-indulgence is concealed from itself.

No one moves.

" Le Pleynier ! " exclaims young Pautauberge, struck with such stupefaction that he seizes his feet in his hands. Le

Pleynier's voice rises, almost offensive in its condescension, and at the same time full of conviction.

" Yes, gentlemen, these people interest me. I cannot forget that they are poor and Alsatians ; their exterior does not affect me, I am not moved by differences of creed ; and we must help one another in this vile world."

A silence follows, during the time that Le Pleynier takes to light his pipe. Finally, des Challeries decides to speak : " You don't really mean it, Le Pleynier ? Those people ? You would be sorry . . . "

" We shall see. If at least Monsieur Boulinier will accept me as seconder ? "

Boulinier remains speechless. The discussion has risen to a level at which he is as helpless as a fish out of water. He can only stammer a few inconsequent words, and turns a bewildered face to his fellow members.

" It shall not be said that, in the land of Voltaire, four poor wretches who have chosen to remain in their stricken country, have been maltreated by their fellow-countrymen. Gentlemen, I propose that we proceed, at your next monthly meeting, to the nomination of Messieurs Simler as members of the Club."

With a little anvil blow of his pipe on the edge of the table, M. Le Pleynier accentuates the abruptness of this conclusion. A cloud of ash falls upon the tiles of the hearth.

Pierrotin, who is the secretary, acts after the fashion of the striking mechanism in a clock. Inert during the rest of the hour, he gets busy as soon as anything sets in motion the wheels of the Rules and Regulations.

" Ah-hah ! The rule lays down, I mean to say, if there is any opposition, and if the proposer and seconder, I mean to say, are not members of the Committee, which is, I mean to say, which is the case here, that the proposal must be supported, I mean to say, by at least one-fourth of the members

of the Club. The rule has been drafted to provide for eventualities, I mean to say. In fact, Monsieur Le Pleynier, you understand, you have no backing."

" Very good. Do your duty as secretary. There are present . . . "

" Twenty-eight ! " cries Lefombère.

" Twenty-eight present, in other words more than a third, to say the least ! "

" And all the regular frequenters ! "

" And all the regular frequenters. Let us proceed to the formality which you mention, Monsieur Pierrotin. If the vote goes against me, I am content."

A few minutes later, M. Le Pleynier, gravely mocking, stands alone facing twenty-six gentlemen silently grouped in front of the door that leads to the cardroom. Between them, Hector Boulinier, helpless as a barge that has broken its moorings, endeavours to liberate his legs from the chairs and his conscience from certain tergiversations. Le Pleynier begins to smile : " I shall not insist."

He has no sooner spoken, than a sound as of fat in a frying-pan issues from the clock. Each of the stomachs present echoes it. Seven solemn strokes sound from the chimney-piece, and sternly conclude a day well spent.

But if a discreet chime is sufficient to announce the time to a group of well dressed gentlemen, the world that stirs beyond their windows needs more peremptory injunctions. That is why the clamour of the sirens succeeds in penetrating the blanket of the thick curtains of red damask.

The roar of the looms stops as though by magic. Their lights are extinguished ; the factories vanish in the night. Autumn alone remains to cover with its wailing the muffled clatter of twenty thousand boots over which flicker, along the streets, the miserable quincunxes of the gas lamps. From

the ground, the mirrors of muddy puddles multiply the agonies of the flames. The rush of damp footsteps trickles and dies away. Shadows still turn the corners, and good nights are exchanged before the banging of doors. As we pass along the streets, we see in succession, behind calico curtains, round tables beneath the yellow light of hanging lamps. Families are sitting down to their supper. Soup-tureens are steaming. Bottles of wine rear their black and dusty necks above the glitter of waxcloth. Four-pound loaves lie sleeping upon their bellies, presenting to the passer-by their open maws. All is warmth and a pleasant light. The street, the fog and the darkness remain the lot of the strangers whom need and chance have cast out of their own homes.

The step of a few stragglers does not diminish the terror of this isolation. For the assured beat of their heels proclaims loudly enough the certainty of people for whom the potent apparatus of comfort is waiting. The gentlemen of the Club do not mix with the others in the street. They go home last of all, along deserted pavements. But they have not been able to resist their curiosity, and prepare to pass with an air of innocence along the buildings of the late lamented Poncet. The soft round hat, which is good enough for young Pautauberge, keeps pace with the broad-brimmed top hat in which M. Le Pleynier encloses the glittering casket of his skull.

Boulinier gives a faint whistle when they reach the little factory. A gas-jet blinks on the avenue ; the bars of a grotesque railing quiver against the front of the building, in which the black holes of its windows gape.

But it is not this that is the spectacle. Two windows open into the lodge so suitable for a porter with no family, and the windows are not lined with curtains.

Seated upon their baggage, on the bare floor, the Simler family are deliberating as they listen to the weeping of the

night. Two candles, stuck in the necks of bottles, distribute a flickering yellow light.

Two men are on their feet ; a tall dry man whose face is mottled like a chessboard, and a little paunchy man with gold spectacles. The others seem to be crouching at their feet. A woman, whose bonnet of faded straw is tilted over her pale, dishevelled hair, presses to her bosom the sleeping form of a little girl ; of the latter nothing is visible but a pair of knees grimy from the seats of railway-carriages and a pair of plump calves plastered with mud. A little boy, clinging to his mother, gazes with awe at his uncle and great-uncle pedestalled upon their own wavering shadows. An old woman dressed in black, bends a sorrowful imperial profile over a carpet bag from which she brings out a few slices of pastry wrapped in a newspaper, and a chain of sausages, the colour of red clay. Lastly, two men, extremely unlike in features and bearing, are seated apart from the rest : one of these, perched upon a tall brown trunk with an arched lid, touches the ground only with the toe of one of his boots ; he sways the other foot mechanically, while his hands move in gestures which the candle-light caricatures upon the faded wall-paper ; the other bends beneath his weight the black leather cover of a hamper. He points with his thumb over his shoulder, towards various things which must be somewhere outside the buildings, outside this night itself.

It is the small man on the trunk who seems to be speaking.

The old woman rises to her feet and distributes the contents of her packages. The fair young woman accepts a sandwich resignedly, but passes it to her little boy. The man seated upon the hamper does not even answer ; the small man on the trunk declines the offer with a disconsolate gesture, while the men who are standing seem to detach themselves suddenly from their shadows, and advance with outstretched hands.

Then one of them, as he tears the sausage with his teeth, which can be seen gleaming beneath his moustache, begins an animated speech. What he is saying arrests the attention of all the rest. His hand points to something in turn, but in the opposite direction. The small man perched on the trunk shrugs his shoulders, folds his hands between his knees and ceases to take any interest in the discussion. But the tall dry man with the chessboard face gives a sudden toss to his head, turns towards the hamper covered in black leather, and reveals, in the light of one of the candles, an enormous birthmark. His counsel prevails. The empress makes haste to shut up her store of provisions. The small dry man slips from the lid of his trunk and makes his way towards the door.

The representatives of the industry of the place ask for nothing more. They have no need of any concerted plan to make them turn round as one man and withdraw from this savage spectacle, with a gait which tries to be neither stealthy nor precipitate.

When M. Lefombère, three hundred yards farther on, after they have crossed the band of light which the café Massoneau sheds across the street, exclaims suddenly : " Good night, gentlemen ! I turn off here ! " everyone else feels relieved at not having had to break the silence ; they forgive him the tone of voice in which he has uttered these simple words.

As for M. Le Pleynier, suddenly dissatisfied with himself and feeling a curious nervous exhaustion, he turns his back and vanishes into the night without saying a word. The twenty-five minutes that he requires to reach his house, on the road to Nantes, heat his blood beyond its normal temperature. And it is with his heart wrung by an anguish the cause of which he seeks in vain to discover, that he has the relief of shutting behind him the big rustic gate that gives access to his garden.

He

XI

Uncle Wilhelm Blum rejoined the others forty-eight hours later, with a first instalment of workmen from Buschendorf, whose luggage was piled in the rooms of the ground floor.

But the Simlers had not wasted any time. On the morning after their arrival, Guillaume had sprung to his feet at the brief six-o'clock summons with which the sirens call the first shifts to work. It was still pitch dark. He had at first been brought in contact with an unfamiliar environment of curtains and carpets, while a cold smell of dampness died away in his nostrils. He had remembered in time that it was no longer a question of Alsace nor of a white factory buried among chestnut-trees, but of a gloomy hotel bedroom, in the chill West.

He had found his candlestick, had kindled a feeble flame, and had dressed himself, shuddering. A little round mirror, in a frame of unvarnished mahogany, which took the place of a looking-glass above a basin of chipped earthenware, had presented him with a fleeting image of himself against which he rose up with all his force. Guillaume Simler might indeed have the haggard appearance which the little mirror reflected ; but three calm respirations which rose and sank alternately, bade him take confidence and make the best of the situation. Once he had shaved, there would be nothing to reveal that he had spent the night in battling against the powers of darkness, and had awakened with a start whenever a cry was wrung from the children by their nightmares.

Joseph had joined him upon the threshold of the little hotel. The younger brother's hand had sought that of the elder, and had pressed it without their uttering a word.

For that matter, they had risen from force of habit. The sirens were not blowing yet for them. They set out nevertheless along the street, in the wake of the sleepy, damply

treading groups which the gates of various factories swallowed in turn.

The looms were beginning to hum, here and there, and the lights to shine. The oil lamps, in long canisters of yellow brass, glowed austerely in the glazed boxes in which the porters marked the worker's names as they entered.

And when, having passed the last groups outside the last gate, they came to the silent phantom of their own factory, a burning, swelling force rose up in them.

From that moment, their work had not ceased.

About eleven o'clock in the morning, they had received a call from Boulinier. The little merchant had greeted them, upon the threshold of the factory, with nonchalance, as though surprised to see them. And in a tone of affectionate rebuke mingled with regret, he had given them an account of the discussion at the Club.

This account would have greatly astonished twenty-seven respectable gentlemen. But there emerged from it the indubitable proof of the devotion shown by a little wool-merchant to the interests of Messieurs Simler, and this was all that the merchant could wish.

He would nevertheless have given a good deal to know exactly what the young men thought of this rebuff. But he was obliged to content himself with brief replies.

When the tall figures of Hippolyte and Myrtil had come into sight at the end of the avenue, and had approached, Boulinier decided that he would find out more. He turned towards them and gave them his greetings. They listened to him in silence, with close attention. Boulinier would have preferred not to feel the glances of the younger Simlers passing over his head, conveying expressions of doubtful confidence. But his duplicity was rewarded, for the Hippopotamus, who had raised his chin towards the end of the speech, said in a thick voice : " Much good may it do them. The dog knows nothing better than its kennel," and left

him without honouring him with a glance. However, Boulinier did not go away until he had booked an order. They needed him, having no other credit open to them at Vendeuvre. Boulinier knew this, and took advantage of it. The Simlers were not unaware that he knew it ; and each side punctiliously played its part. So, on the first Saturday, the travellers found the new firm issuing wool for distribution to the women of the countryside who spin with wheels. On the following Saturday they received enough yarn from this wool to supply the weavers.

They were obliged to go ahead, even without customers. There must be pieces of cloth in the warehouse, not only because an empty warehouse depresses the purchaser, but most of all so that they might surround themselves as quickly as possible with that odour, that touch, that spectacle so necessary to their existence.

The Simlers set to work without delay, as soon as night fell, to write, upon the hotel table, short letters in which Messieurs Simler had the honour to announce to their honoured patrons that the seat of their factory had been shifted from Buschendorf to Vendeuvre, and that they hoped that their honoured patrons would continue their confidence and would carry on their business relations, basing this hope upon the pains which they had always taken in manufacturing their wares, as well as upon their scrupulous execution of the orders that they had received. As for the reasons for their migration, the Simlers would have died of shame rather than make the slightest allusion to it. But they were drooping with sleep over their papers.

They had still to weed out the contractors' estimates and to check the invoices for the work that had been done. No one would give them credit. These adventurers would perhaps no longer be in the town at the end of the year. The *Avenir de Vendeuvre* had suggested as much. The refusal of those gentlemen of the Club must have had some reason. A

man does not do things without a serious and pondered reason when he is named des Challeries, Pommier, Morindet, Pierrotin or Boulinier.

This is why the inn presented, every Saturday at five o'clock, its weekly bill, without making any charge for the bugs. One Saturday when, after turning out their pockets, they had not been able to put up more than thirty francs in cash, the landlord had the insolence to keep them waiting for their dinner until half-past eight, to serve them in the kitchen and to refuse them any dessert.

When the locksmith's or mason's apprentices brought their bills, they waited for their money, clutching the stamped receipts in their fingers ; their hobnailed boots clattered on the stone threshold like the shoes of a horse, and they exchanged loud jokes with the waiter and kitchenmaid.

The trifle that came from the Sterns had thus more than once saved their honour. The first moments had nevertheless been bitter. Everything must be started afresh, and must be started.

Joseph, who had set out on a voyage of discovery, wrote from Elbeuf reporting a good bargain in Mercier looms ; a weaving-mill was in liquidation ; Myrtil took the train and settled the matter. But the furnace stood in urgent need of repair ; it had served the lamented Poncet as a wine-cellar, and, since his death, had been a roosting-place for bats.

Joseph had gone on to Roubaix and Sedan ; a series of telegrams announced five assortments of carding, a " Willy," four horizontal spinning-frames, two combs.

If Hippolyte and Myrtil spent their time principally in keeping guard over the building, casting fiery glances to right and left, Guillaume and Uncle Blum multiplied themselves to greater advantage.

The glazier, the mason, the carpenter, the plumber had descended upon the lifeless body, and had gradually restored it to life. Goblin lights of labour, which were those of the

lamps hung from nails by the workmen of the various crafts, had shone from the windows.

The women had not yet seen the factory save at nightfall. They had spent the first few days in settling the children and adapting the four rooms in the inn. Finally Blum had come to fetch them. He knew the place by this time as though he had built it all himself.

At their entry, Fritz's martial moustache had swollen with pleasure ; he was coming out of the future home of his employers—that suitable porter's lodge— ; he was carrying on his shoulder a bundle of worm-eaten laths. From under these he had given them a military salute, with an expression calculated to warm the thirty-one nights of December.

" Madame Hippolyte, we are building your nest."

" And you, Fritz, where are you living ? "

The Alsatian had nodded in the direction of the main building : " There are lots of people," he had said, " who are worse housed. Monsieur Guillaume has found us a corner, for the time being. But go and inspect your empire, Madame Hippolyte ; it will amuse the children. You will see how fine it is, and that there is plenty of room to weave cloth ! "

Blum had led them straight to the main building. He had pushed open a soiled wooden door that needed repainting ; a cast-iron weight, hanging from a leather strap, shut the door again behind them. This resistance following the thrust had reminded the women of the little side door of the Buschendorf synagogue. But instead of plunging into the unctuous and attentive twilight of silence, and feeling their hearts swell at the conquest of the temple, they had at once blinked their eyes, and everything had receded from them, for a bleak and unexpected glare had assailed them.

A long alternation of sickly daylight and whitewashed wall occupied the room on the ground floor. The milky light of October peered through the five windows ; the floor,

cleared of its rubbish, faced them with the penury of its bare boards. A rusty transmission-rod ran along the room from end to end, the sole object to which the room might have attached itself. But its immobility rendered it useless for that purpose. So the heart and soul of the room, entangled among the cobwebs, abode there, aloft, naked, seemingly dead. The slightest shock tore it from its lethargy with the echoing roar of an explosion.

At the moment when the women entered, a little black-coated group was moving at the other end of it ; it was Hippolyte accompanied by his sons and by strangers. No sooner had he caught sight of them than he left the room, the rest following him. So that the burden of that soft luminosity rested upon themselves alone. It had crushed them. To humanise that immensity, people it, subdivide it, had seemed to them an overwhelming task. Their housewifely scrutiny had taken in the smallest details, and everything that they saw made them despair. Sarah's eyes had turned red and stabbing :

" Good God ! " she had said ; " the poor children ! "

Meanwhile the cripple never breathed a word. He had brought them out at the far end of the room. The bang of the closing door had sounded behind his shoulders with so cavernous an echo that a memory had assailed Sarah's mind; turning her head towards her silent daughter-in-law, she had found her great blue eyes fastened upon herself : a brick-lined pit, and a long wooden box that is lowered into it by two cords, which bumps and thuds against the sides, was lurking in both their minds.

They had followed Blum up to the loft and its mass of rubbish. The uncle had with difficulty opened a window, and the women had leaned out, Hermine holding her children in her arms.

They had taken their fill of the spectacle with a savage deliberateness. The fact was that " their empire " was

revealed to them in a different aspect. The vast was followed by the meagre. A miserable little quadrangle. The women saw only three stunted sides of it ; they could feel the fourth side closing behind them, a few yards away.

All that money ! All that money for so little ! And more than the money, all that anxiety, all that passion, all those altercations, all that hope and turmoil, to end in these four low walls, this courtyard of black mud, the sordid avarice of these buildings !

" Good God ! " Sarah had said once again ; " the poor children ! "

Vanquished by her discouraging tone, the little uncle had turned to Laure and Justin with an evident want of assurance : " Well, little lady, what do you say to this palace ? Is it fine enough, big enough for you ? There'll be grand games of hide and seek in this loft—if Mamma allows them " (a sidelong glance at Hermine). " Lean out, Tintin, and don't be frightened, I am holding you. Upon my word, it's a bit higher than the loft at Buschendorf ! You want to look too, do you ? Make room for your sister ; here comes my Laure-Mayor."

Nobody, not even Wilhelm Blum himself, remembered the point of this joke. It had emerged one day from the *Messager boiteux de Strasbourg* ; but the description of London that had given birth to it had long been forgotten. The pun survived like a bad habit, at which the grown-ups did not fail to show due irritation. It is true that Wilhelm Blum had not yet reached the stage of irritation.

" Look, now, down there. Do you see Papa, and Uncle Joseph, and Grandpapa Hippolyte, and my Uncle Myrtil crossing the yard ? Come along, call out something to them. Good day ! Hep ! Hey, you there ! Good day ! Oho ! Look how they're lifting their heads ! Ohoho ! You see how pleased they are ! Blow them a kiss with your little hand, my Laure-Mayor ! Too late. What a pity. It must keep until next

spring. Look where they have gone in, on the right, Hermine; that is the building which they mean to use for dyeing. Oh ! they'll have lots of room, even if they don't send out to the dyeworks. And beneath the other roof, farther on, which runs to the corner, the dressing will be done. All of that, good solid stuff, d'you hear, Sarah, and easy to add on another storey when the ground floor isn't big enough for them. I have examined the foundations : solid rock. The boys showed what they were worth, the day they discovered this factory. Now then, Tintin, don't lean out like that. The chimney, is it ? We shall go down and let you look at it. Yes, my boy, a fine furnace which will start roaring one of these days, when Grandpapa Hippolyte has ordered the coal to put in it, and then everything will begin to move, and turn, and hum in this factory. And the wool that Moussu Boulinier brings to that little house, over there, on the left of the courtyard, will pass over the cards, where my Uncle Myrtil will turn it into good yarn. And then my Uncle Myrtil will take the yarn upstairs, to Grandpapa Hippolyte, who will put it on the looms and make it into good cloth. And then Papa will come and fetch it and will take it down there, to the right, to wash it, and scour it, and mill it, and comb it, and dye it, and press it, and weigh it, and that will make it into good stuff. Then Uncle Joseph will take it on the train all the way to Paris, where Cousin Jacob will sell it to fine gentlemen and pretty ladies. And then Uncle Joseph will come back from Paris and say : " Look, I have sold all mine, and Jacob has sold all his. And then Papa, and Grandpapa, and my Uncle Myrtil will be very glad, and Fritz Braun will be glad, and old Hermann will be glad, and Pouppelé will shut the gate, that night, with a happy face, and Kapp will waggle his long red nose for joy, and Gottlieb will run to tell the news to Mina Gottlieb, and Zeller will walk solemnly along in his muffler, rubbing his hands for joy, and papa will come home and tell grandmamma and mamma,

and Tintin will run like the wind, and my Laure-Mayor will pick up her skirts so as not to be left behind, and they'll both come running to *onkele* Wilhelm and *tantele* Babette, and tell them the good news, then they'll all join hand in hand and dance round the table, round the *Kugel*, round the *Honig*, round the *Magen*, round the *Bretzel*, and then bumpety-bump, down we'll all fall on the ground ! "

And as he was actually making the children dance round, he had cast a glance out of the window, and had begun to whine, in the most absurd voice :

" Here is that old silly Babette come to look for me ! "

The thought that *tantele* Babette could be called an old silly, and the thought that anyone could waste her time in looking for *onkele* Wilhelm had sent the children into such fits of laugher, that he had had to take one under each arm and carry them wriggling down the stairs, with the risk of dislocating his clubfoot for good and all.

Uncle Wilhelm's functions were not so negligible as had at first appeared. When the first machines that Joseph had purchased arrived, everything was ready for their installation.

When the cases had been broken open, they appeared, with that unctuous and chilly aspect, which makes metal suggest serpents.

Like serpents, too, they slid, piece by piece, from the cases. Once they had been laid down or propped against the walls, until they could be assembled, they were like so many spearpoints by which the atmosphere of the room was stabbed, and upon which it finally expired.

Sarah, summoned at once by her elder son, no longer felt, when the door had closed behind her, the burden of the soft whiteness, nor the smell of death. The floor was covered with unassembled pieces of machinery. The gleam of the green paint, with which the castings were coated, absorbed the daylight, gave it form and colour. The gay

autumn sun, which entered through the polished windows, began, first and foremost, by outlining the spine of a metal shaft. A faint odour of grease and varnish was beginning to float in the air. The transmission-rod still pierced the room from end to end ; but the brown flesh of the iron had come to light ; oil covered its surface with gleaming spirals like the tracks of snails. Driving-bands of fresh leather swung indolently, diffusing an acrid odour, offering their strength like that of a domesticated animal.

They could breathe freely. They advanced beneath the guidance of the metal shaft. They passed from loom to loom. Space was conquered.

It was the same on the floor above, the same again in the two low buildings in the yard. Guillaume took his mother to the furnace. A steam generator, of good make, picked up as a bargain at Mulhouse, reared aloft its cylindrical guillotine. The piston rod was swimming in oil. A brass pressure-gauge splashed the wall with light. The cylinder, cased in wood and belted with broad hoops of brass, seemed like a parlour ornament of preposterous size.

The fireman greeted his employer's wife by swiftly raising his hand to his blue cap, and resumed his polishing, watching the strangers with a sullen attention.

" Good day, sir," replied Sarah Simler with her renowned civility.

" Pailloux, this is my mother," Guillaume said in his turn, as a man may utter those words five or six times, ten times at the most, in the course of his life.

But this man who was so neurotic, was he neurotic enough—or was he neurotic enough, once he had emerged from his own cosmos—to echo the emotion that had gripped his mother when he uttered the two syllables of that unknown name ?

A name more than unknown, an alien name. The shock was so violent that Sarah's mind swung like a vessel straining

at its anchor. Fifty Alsatian names passed through her heart, in dancing, rounded syllables, framed all of them for familiarity or mockery, names that sound like nicknames, garrulous Christian names that reveal everything with a laugh, parentage, neighbourhood, character, reputation, age, and handicraft.

But there was an end, for ever, of all neighbourhood, all familiarity. The man who was standing there, slender and stooping, in his stained overalls, was indeed Pailloux, a man of the West to his fingertips and to the bottom of his heart. How long would it take Sarah to discover the virtues which the West conceals, beneath its banter, its laziness and its dirt? Pailloux, in the meantime, stood before her, with his evasive name and his suspicious glance, as the symbol of the world into which she had been flung.

And Guillaume might squander in vain the treasures of a morbid sentimentality, in introducing his mother to the new fireman of the factory; there was an end now, and for ever, of the time when Hippolyte's wife had been, in the eyes of all and sundry, *Königin Simler.*

Pailloux again raised his hand to the peak of his cap, and resumed his work. When all was said, what were these people, and what new element could they claim to introduce, in a land where, for the last two thousand years, everything had been said and attempted?

"Let us go home, my son," Madame Hippolyte murmured, when they had come out of the furnace. And they returned to the hotel side by side without exchanging a word.

XII

It had not required any lengthy calculation for Uncle Wilhelm to dispose of his little cloth business at Colmar. It had disposed of itself. The war had seen to that. The Simlers—and first and foremost Blum himself—found this an

advantage, for there was nothing to distract the uncle from devoting his time to the new factory. His inventive genius which a sort of shyness prevented him from employing to his own profit, found here material to develop.

There was, on the left of the entrance, facing the " convenient " lodge, a little structure of yellow brick, backed by the outer wall. It consisted of two communicating rooms, one relatively short and lofty, the other long and covered by a low ceiling above which there was a loft. Outcrops of saltpetre had detached from the walls in long strips a flowered paper dating from the days of the July Monarchy. The wooden floor had warped and cracked under the pressure of damp. The gaps in the tiled roof gave admission to nocturnal regiments of cats, whose manœuvres brought rage and desperation to the hearts of an important colony of rats. The late Poncet's porter had used the place as a store for his firewood and for the booty of countless depredations.

Blum saw this filthy shed, and formed his plans for it. What is certain is that he passed into it and vanished. For the last fortnight nothing had been seen or heard of him, save at mealtimes. But while Guillaume was supervising the installation of the machinery and the allotment of the different buildings, he more than once found himself pricking his ears, when he heard in the distance *Hans im Schnogeloch* chanted by the most tuneless voice in Alsace. Meanwhile the uncle would come slipping furtively in through the gate, his greatcoat bulging with parcels, and followed by errand-boys in white blouses, laden like mules.

Then there came, at cockcrow, a handcart which nearly foundered in the quagmire of the yard and halted outside the door of the little outhouse. When the Club gentlemen noticed it, it was already returning, relieved of its load, drawn by a taciturn lad, harnessed to it by a leather strap.

That same evening, sheets of wrapping-calico screened the windows and door of the little outhouse.

" *Stinkerei !* How you reek of turpentine," said Babette one day to her husband.

" *Pfui !* How you smell of grease, you old silly," replied the man who could never be serious, with a wink at his great-nephew and niece. Babette and he fed now and then with the rest of the family. But they lodged farther afield, near the Porte de Paris, in a carters' inn with which the Simlers would not have put up at any price. Babette did the cooking upon a little cast-iron stove ; this sorceress discovered a way of conjuring up, by the aid of mystic formulas, some of those combinations of pastry, grease, meat, sugar and spices which, for a time, appeased the nostalgia that was devouring them all.

" Joseph is coming back to-night," Wilhelm Blum announced one evening as he opened the door of their room ; he let himself sink down on a chair, took off his cap, mopped his hair, and held out towards the stove his hands stiff with the cold and smeared with paint.

" *Um Gottes Willen !* " the shrill, chanting voice of Babette hastened to respond by way of exorcism.

" What could God wish better ? " replied her husband. " It is high time. Our Guillaume is killing himself with work. There's plenty to be done, and he won't allow anyone else to do it."

The old woman muttered as she lifted the lid of a pot ; a smell of boiled potatoes escaped rapturously, like a prisoner restored to freedom : " You can't say the same of his father or of Myrtil ! "

" You don't know what you're saying, Babette ! " the club-foot exclaimed angrily. " Hippolyte was the strongest man in the Haut-Rhin. He will put the people here in his pocket. Nobody has ever doubted him but yourself. I don't know what you have against him."

" Get along with you ! Go and kill yourself for him."

" I am not killing myself, but there isn't a soul alive that

could see the poor boys in the position they are in without lending them a helping hand ! Hippolyte is not cut out for that sort of work. A fine occupation for a man of his sort ! It is for us to drive in the nails. Hippolyte is the man to produce the goods. Wait just six months, and you'll see whether he doesn't find work for them all. Ah ! those gentlemen are proud and disgusted, are they ? I ask you ! My blood fairly boils when I pass by their Club. A proper pigsty, upon my word it is. Did anyone ever see the like ? "

Babette had spread a white napkin over the dubious tablecloth. She set on it the lamp, two earthenware plates, pewter forks and spoons, the tumblers, the water-bottle, the salt-cellar and a saucer of butter ; then she removed the pot from the stove ; a few drops escaped from it to perish with a great splutter upon the heated iron ; the potatoes rolled out on the plates and clouded themselves in steam, like the Eternal upon Sinai.

Wilhelm Blum, appeased by this spectacle, turned his chair, grasped his knife, and let his eyes rest upon his wife. A tiny mouth, but plump and kindly, parted its lips with an air of calm. A chin, once pink, now the colour of amber, at all times charming, was muffled in a mattress of appetising flesh. This cool, living covering rested upon a bodice of black stuff. A procession of cloth-covered buttons, black and round, ran down it from throat to waist, and left no doubt as to the breasts which were thrust into prominence by the tightness of the stays. The upper part of the face was invisible in the shadow cast by the lampshade.

" Babette ! " the cripple cried gaily, " Babette, our Joseph comes back to-night, and to-morrow, to-morrow, they are lighting the furnace in the factory."

The worthy man had waited all this time with a view to producing a greater effect. He produced none at all.

" Babette, do you hear me ? "

The little mouth quivered, but it was to give passage,

with a mouselike nibble, to a little, a tiny piece of steaming potato. The flash of a tongue-tip, plump and furrowed, appeared, the mouth closed, the potato vanished, the lips parted again calmly, and did not move.

The little man grew indignant.

" Have you no heart, Babette ? "

" My poor Wilhelm, have you given a single thought to your own affairs, since you came to this place ? "

" Everyone in his turn. They must come first, it is only justice."

" Justice is not everything, we must have bread too."

" They have only to make the stuff, then I shall sell it."

" You will sell, provided they don't sell it direct to gentlemen in Paris."

" Do we need as much as that to live ? Let it be, Babette, our heirs will be quite content."

" Our heirs might indeed be quite content to find a few sous at the foot of our stocking. Who knows whether they won't expect more of us, one fine day ? "

" You can see for yourself, Babette ! When I work at the factory, I am working as much for ourselves as for them."

They continued upon this theme until there was not a boiled potato left in the pot, and the little man, assisted by his little wife, had cleaned up a modest plate of salt beef, flanked with gherkins.

Wilhelm's gruff voice met the crystal-clear arguments of Babette with responses that had become liturgical by force of habit. They did not convince each other. Of what, for that matter, could they have been convinced ? Everyone acts according to his own nature. And the nature of the Blum couple led them to rise from their bed, on the morrow, before daybreak, to dress themselves shivering, by the light of a halfpenny candle, and to walk a mile in order to reach, before any other living soul, the gate of the factory.

The moon, as round as a swollen face, and as polished as a patent-leather slipper, slipped silently behind a motley band of wintry clouds. Pouppelé, who was lodged provisionally in his employer's house, came out at the rattle of the gate. The uncle carried his own key, like a chamberlain.

A few lanterns were bobbing at the end of the avenue. Voices drew nearer. In couples, or in files, human figures glided into the yard ; two distinct groups were gradually formed. The men spoke in lowered tones. From time to time, a gulp indicated the emptying of a flask of spirits down a human throat. For a moment, a voice proclaimed, by its exuberance, the success of this operation. Then whispers again prevailed.

A ringing cough was Hippolyte. The two heads of the business and the young men appeared, and began with a strange encounter.

Monsieur des Challeries was going out shooting with Messieurs Pautauberge and Lefombère. They passed by the Poncet building, at the moment when its new occupants were about to enter. The gas jet on the avenue had long been put out. The jets in the factory were not to be lighted until circumstances permitted the purchase of a meter and the repair of the pipes. But a moonbeam lighted the whole scene.

The Alsatians had put on, for this occasion, their frock-coats and silk hats. Hippolyte wore his hat like a dungeon and the cut of his coat did not encourage mirth. The four men saluted with a simultaneous gesture and passed through the gate without unbending from their stiffness. The three gentlemen had barely time to raise their hands to the peaks of their shooting-caps ; their action revealed confusion, a profound surprise, and came too late. The sportsmen stopped short, and this is what they beheld :

The four men went in. One corner of the darkness burst like a ripe pomegranate. Fifty voices rang out. The group

of workmen from the West, newly enlisted, remained buried in the darkness, and contented themselves with brushing it from their faces in a salute. The blond voices uttered three shouts :

" *Fife la France ! Fife l'Alsace ! Fife Simler !* "

At that moment, a crude, precedented, sudden daylight of a magic blue rose behind the Alsatians ; the men of the West received it in their faces. To the blue light was added a white, then, immediately after it, a red. On the avenue, the gentlemen were ablaze. The neighbouring walls stood out from the darkness, like a transformation scene in a pantomime. One could see a chimney-top behind the sharp outline of a chestnut-tree. The silhouettes of the Alsatians broke out again with : " *Fife la France !* "

Quite half of the other group responded. M. Hippolyte knitted his brows. Guillaume wept unashamed. The three Bengal flares died out at the same moment, leaving in the men's hearts the echo of a too-exciting music. The moon's penurious lantern remained alone suspended over the factory. The groups melted in the darkness with a shuffling tread. The yard was empty. The gentlemen were pensive during their sport.

While the workmen were going to the rooms, a few of the Alsatians, forewarned, made their way towards the boiler-house. Fritz ran into Blum in a doorway and nudged his elbow with the air of an accomplice. The half-light hid the cloth merchant's grimace of satisfaction.

Pailloux was at the door. He had lighted a little miner's lamp.

" Here we are, Pailloux ; let us go down," said M. Myrtil's voice. The ranks parted to make way for the four manufacturers. Pailloux stepped upon the iron ladder which led to the basement. His rope-soled shoes soon reached the bottom. The others began to descend backwards, by the light of the lamp which the fireman held up to guide them.

It took some time before they were all assembled by the wall of the boiler, at the foot of which the trap of the furnace opened a dark, cold throat. Tintin's voice rang out again from the floor above : " May we come down ? We missed the illumination ! "

Joseph and Uncle Blum hurried up to fetch the two children. The women, who had brought them, remained upstairs with Aunt Babette.

" Here is the coal, Sir," said Pailloux, in an undertone, pointing out the pile of fuel to Hippolyte ; a shovel was planted in it. The silence became profound.

" This morning, the sixteenth of November, after a year and a half of war and unemployment, and in consequence of our option for the quality of French citizens, we find ourselves gathered together among stout-hearted men to start again. I declare this day to be the first effective day of the new factory. We have come down here to place the first piece of coal in this furnace. In an hour from now, all the looms will be at work. They are good looms. Everything has been checked, tested, bought at the highest price. God grant that they may never stop save from Saturday night to Monday morning. My brother, my wife, my sons and myself, thank all those who have chosen to accompany us. They are gallant Alsatians. I announce to all those who are newcomers that with us men work hard, but that we are parted by death alone, and then, I believe, satisfied with one another. But this is not the time for sentiment. To work, and may God give His blessing to our labours."

The darkness was indeed beginning to conceal heaving bosoms and moist eyes. The strong face of Monsieur Hippolyte was alone lighted by Pailloux's lamp.

The manufacturer stooped, seized the shovel, and, with the grunt of a baggage-porter, drew from the heap an enormous shovelful of coal. He lifted it without any sign of strain to the open trap, and there, with an abrupt gesture,

scattered it in the void of the furnace ; the iron shovel rang against the brick wall. Having done this, he drew himself erect, very red in the face, straightened his frock coat, and handed the shovel to Myrtil who stepped forward.

No word, no signal had been given : but each came forward in turn, took the shovel from the hands of the last person, and flung a shovelful of coal into the furnace. Laure and Justin were helped by Joseph and uncle Wilhelm. Pailloux lighted this ceremony without unclenching his teeth.

It was disconcerting and silent, like the procession of mourners by a graveside. To weavers, coal was indeed a sort of consecrated earth. And it was not difficult, at the start of the winter of 1872, to imagine all that these men were engaged in burying.

But those who, at Vendeuvre, were engaged in watching them with suspicion, were they being suspicious enough ? For there are people in this world who are capable of making life out of death, and Hippolyte's gesture was by no means the gesture of a man who has resigned himself to fate.

Up above, day had begun to break ; it turned Pailloux's lamp pale. As the others were dispersing to the various work rooms, Blum plucked Joseph's sleeve.

" Come with me, you, and tell the others to follow us."

They followed, greatly astonished, and were still more astonished when Blum tore down the wrapping-cloth that screened the entrance to the little building. An oak door, new and freshly varnished, met their gaze. A brass plate glittered. Blum struck a match, and said : " What is that engraved there ? "

" Uncle Wilhelm ! " Joseph could not help exclaiming. The word *Warehouse* was engraved on the brass in black capitals four inches high. The uncle took a little key from his pocket, pushed open the door, struck a second match,

climbed upon something and lighted a solid lamp that hung from the ceiling. Its light flooded the room to its farthest corners. A second brass lamp was suspended at the same height at the other end. Four long oak tables occupied the floor space, two on either side. The wall, entirely coated with fresh distemper, was furnished from floor to ceiling, with shelves of bright new oak, ready to support without bending the weight of the pieces of cloth. A ladder communicated with the loft above. The floor was beeswaxed. Everything smelt new and fresh, and polished.

" Uncle Wilhelm ! " Joseph again exclaimed, and seizing his uncle in his arms hugged him warmly. Guillaume waited his turn to do the same ; but the Warehouse was Joseph's department.

" It's not possible, it's not possible ! " muttered Hippolyte and Myrtil as they made a tour of the room. Blum succeeded in releasing himself.

" You have not seen it all ! "

They followed him into the adjoining room. The increasing daylight made the lamp superfluous. This room was high and square. A round table, covered with a green cloth, stood in the centre. By the window a pair of mahogany writing-tables stood face to face, upholstered in moleskin, and provided each with a pasteboard filing-cabinet. A large double cabinet stood against the back wall. A bronze Empire clock, escorted by its pair of candelabra, adorned the wooden chimneypiece painted to imitate marble. An oil lamp stood upon the table. Lastly four armchairs and four leather upright chairs invited the occupants to work or to meditation. Guillaume approached the writing table : the inkpots were filled with their differently coloured inks side by side ; the new pens rested upon cloth penwipers.

" Your office, gentlemen ! " said Blum, colouring as he spoke.

" You, Wilhelm ? " and the Hippopotamus halted, facing

his brother-in-law. "You, Wilhelm? Why, you are worth more than the lot of us put together."

And he gripped him with his own strong hands. Even Myrtil betrayed emotion. Blum, slightly confused, managed to say :

"It is my present . . . for the opening . . . Not worth mentioning . . . Except for the furniture, I made everything myself."

They went to fetch the women ; there were fresh cries of astonishment. Babette stood confounded by the generosity and guile of her husband. But as she had brought with her, on her part, without saying a word, a hamper filled with Alsatian pastries, the creature of her little cast-iron stove, she produced her surprise. The children sat down at the table ; and such was the official opening, upon this morning in November 1871, of the factory and office of the *Nouveaux Etablissements Simler*, at Vendeuvre.

PART II

I

He pushed the gate. A bell rang. He was in the Le Pleyniers' garden.

Joseph had been putting off this call for the last six months. The Simlers had not been long in hearing of M. Le Pleynier's vain endeavour on their behalf at the Cercle du Commerce. But the old gentleman had never shown them any more sign of recognition than a distant raising of his hat ; and none of the Simlers had felt that he had the leisure, or was in the humour to diminish that distance.

No sooner had the bell tinkled than four or five dogs began to bark, and a girl appeared, at the turn of a winding path. She had a pair of shears in her hand and was carrying a few sprays of budding foliage. Joseph did not know her by sight. He did not doubt for an instant that it was she. Hélène Le Pleynier had a reputation.

He took his hat in his hand, and made his way towards her between rose-hedges on which the buds were already bursting. She smiled and stopped to watch him advance. Perhaps Joseph Simler was known to her also.

" Mademoiselle . . . Is Monsieur Le Pleynier at home, and can he see me ? "

" If you will come with me, Sir, I shall inquire."

She spoke in a grave and measured tone. As he followed her, Joseph was impressed by the almost bold decision of her step, and by the supple and robust fullness of her figure. Her skirt, of a plain beige taffeta, was finished behind with a large bow of the same stuff. She rustled over the gravel of the carefully raked paths, stirring a little warm breeze, which the young man received on his shins.

When they came to a wider path, she made a half-turn, and, without halting, pointed out to him, with a nod of amusement, the house, half-hidden in the distance by the branches of the pleached alley.

The garden, which was very big, indicated at once great care and a studied neglect, like its gate which was made of rough wood, but was scrupulously kept up in the English style. There was no sign of any servant. It seemed that the same dilettante spirit controlled the service of the establishment and the upkeep of the park.

But Joseph was conscious, at the moment, only of the gleam of a neck of dull gold, between the white frill of the collar and a thick tress of chestnut hair.

And he was still asking himself what was implied by the furtive and slightly mocking scrutiny of a pair of violet eyes, when the master of the house entered the room in which Mademoiselle Le Pleynier had asked the visitor to wait.

So far from disarming Joseph, the old man's majesty restored his assurance.

He straightened his spectacles and began in a friendly tone :

" Sir, my obliging guide vanished before I could ask her to give you my name. I am Monsieur Joseph Simler ; you can now guess the purpose of my visit."

Le Pleynier had listened to him with a stern air and without a quiver on his face. The Alsatian's candour seemed to increase his solemnity. He waved his hand to bid the other be seated, and himself sat down in an armchair.

" I am delighted, Sir, to make your acquaintance. But I confess that I do not know to what I am indebted for the honour."

" It is true, Sir, that in six months you have had time to forget it a hundred times. My father, Monsieur Hippolyte Simler, who is suffering from gout and has difficulty in

walking, has asked me to make his apologies for his not having conveyed our thanks to you earlier and in person."

Monsieur Le Pleynier continued to examine the young man without speaking ; his clean-shaven lips tightened with reserve. Joseph went on with the too ready patter of a commercial traveller, unable to restrain a familiar gesture of his forearm.

" Surely, you do not expect me to believe that my name does not recall to you an occasion at the Cercle du Commerce last October, of which we have heard more than once, and in which you played a part wh—"

He stopped short. Monsieur Le Pleynier had just cast a slight glance at his guest's boots, which were white with dust from the road. And a furtive light had sparkled in his little eyes. Joseph at once realised that this detail could not have escaped the girl's notice ; he recalled the rapid and amused scrutiny of her eyes. He forgot the friendliness of her glance, and blushed as he hid his feet beneath the chair.

He studied the other over his spectacles, and continued with a less frank appreciation of the situation :

" However it may be, Sir, you cannot suppose that a deliberation so many details of which were of interest to us should not have been reported to us with glee by half the town. That is . . . what happened."

As Le Pleynier still made no sign of response, he raised his voice and threw back his head to finish his speech :

" We know that you intervened in the discussion, Sir, and that it was not your fault that the candidature of my father and my uncle, Monsieur Myrtil Simler, for the Cercle du Commerce, was not taken into consideration."

Le Pleynier unfolded his hands with an expression of courteous but profound boredom.

" What you say, Sir, is possible, but I do not remember the occasion. In any case, there was no deliberation. As for

what may be said in conversation, these are things which one forgets, however keen may be the interest of the questions that may have been debated."

The cold politeness of this reply succeeded in making Joseph feel ill at ease. With a sigh, he wiped his brow with a gloved finger, and let his eyes range round the room.

He had no doubt that the old man remembered the whole incident perfectly. But his instinct lacked a certain polish which would have enabled him to penetrate the reason that underlay this make-believe.

The very different tone in which the old man resumed the conversation did not throw any light upon the mystery.

" I am delighted, all the same, that the gossip of a small town should afford me an opportunity of making your acquaintance. Has not your father entered into possession of a factory . . . let me think ? "

" Poncet's ? "

" Precisely. Did you find a satisfactory agent ? There are some who are very shady."

" It was Gabard who . . ."

" He is not exactly a champion."

Joseph felt a strong desire to escape. " This individual is sly and conceited," he said to himself ; and began to look upon the white whiskers and grey gaiters of his companion as so many provoking details.

All the same, he did not go ; indeed, in the next quarter of an hour, his adversary had gently drawn him on to a topic on which his flow was unending :

" There will have to be a clean sweep, Sir," he was to be heard saying ; " the commercial customs of the place are ponderous, the manufacturers are grand gentlemen. They consent to make cloth but do not condescend to sell. They think it beneath their dignity to canvass their customers. That is all very fine ; but, run on these lines, industry languishes. Why, here you have a town which is the only, or

practically the only place in the world that makes a speciality of *amazone*. I expected to find here a mass of huge mills fitted with the latest machinery. And what did we see, when we arrived ? Ten factories, obviously important, but so far from what they might be that one asks oneself how they can have managed to supply the market for so long."

" You are young, Monsieur Simler," replied the crafty old man, making his hand thrust forward in the other's direction the folds of his right ear. " You are young, and you believe that ardour is necessarily better than the most established customs."

" Sir, customs are what we make them. I arrived from Paris, last night ; I return there on Wednesday week, and so every fortnight, sometimes oftener. It is expensive and tiring. But our family is united and numerous, we divide the duties among ourselves. I bring back fresh orders each time. I make our firm known. Perhaps, in a few months from now, you will hear certain manufacturers complain that we have taken customers from them. We do not fight with unfair weapons. But why am I always alone on the Paris train ? "

Joseph forgot that the word " I " is odious. The honest fellow deluged his confidences with it.

" I do not deny that your methods may be above reproach. And yet, as you say, those journeys are expensive. The outlay must be recovered somehow. Believe me, customers always return to the best goods."

" We recover the outlay from our profits, not by raising the net price. We are satisfied with a smaller profit, but we want more business. And that business we will have."

" You are united ; that is your main strength."

Joseph did not stop to consider the general and particular implications of this " you." He felt himself soaring upon wings.

" This town of Vendeuvre, it is not a year ago that I saw

it for the first time ; well, I have become more ambitious for it than the men who were born here. It ought to be ten times more important and more active."

" Remember that old towns are not handled so easily as young ones. You are not in America, gold is scarcer here than in Colorado."

" An admirable country, Sir ! But it is all new, all young ! What is Alsace in comparison ? Forgive my frankness : a threadbare carpet. Here everything abounds. One has only to stoop. The people here have never done anything."

The old man responded gently to this trenchant aphorism : " I am all the more aware of that, Sir, since I am the son and grandson of manufacturers, and was myself a manufacturer for thirty years, and put up my shutters, eight years ago, convinced that there was nothing to be done, in business, except to live from hand to mouth, or lose one's capital."

Joseph once more lost his presence of mind. Le Pleynier restored it with a smile that deepened the dimples in his cheeks and a relishing quiver of his clown's nose.

" However, you may try, Sir, colonise us if you can. Young strength has never injured an old country. I shall watch you in the process as a friendly spectator."

He isolated the epithet with a pedantic and intentional drawl. Joseph did not know where to turn. Le Pleynier pursued the subject and began to talk, in the same tone, of his own factory. Joseph remembered suddenly that he had visited it with Guillaume, the year before, under Gabard's guidance. It opened upon a sort of blind-alley, narrow and dark. They had rejected it because it was too small and because of the inconvenient access.

And while his host was speaking, he studied with an increasing astonishment that faultless interior, full of a subdued opulence, of significant, rare memories. His eyes drifted back to the neatly groomed old man whose clean-shaven

lips were emitting, with such an elegant detachment, memories of capitulation at which Joseph could not help blushing. He thought of the garden, at once wild and carefully tended, and of the beautiful, silent girl, with her easy manners, her indulgent and observing eyes, who had taken him into the house. This was like a little spark that had been kindled in him and sought throughout his being for a wick on which it might take fire and spread. He felt a sudden desire to interrupt Monsieur Le Pleynier in order to tell him that he himself played the flute. But he did not know how to introduce this topic.

Monsieur Le Pleynier, on his feet, his face raised in the air, was at the moment uttering various opinions as to real estate, rents, and the Bordeaux Assembly of which he had nearly become a member. He took down from the walls and showed to Joseph a number of family souvenirs. He pointed out to him certain pieces of furniture to which a history or some well-known name was attached.

Then he took him out of doors and showed him all his rose-bushes. He expressed himself without either gaiety or irony, but with a slightly emphatic calm tinged with melancholy. He was wearing a straw hat with a broad brim, though the sun of this early May was not yet scorching ; he walked slowly, and stopped, with bent shoulders, to declaim.

Joseph, who had failed to explain to himself the feeling that had overwhelmed him, began to feel bored. He lent a docile ear to his host's paraphrases. But the interest of these stories escaped him ; what could all these people really have done of whom he was hearing ? He tried to indicate that he was attending. Le Pleynier barely listened to him. He became silent. After all, the worthy man was no better than a lunatic. What affectation !

Joseph had reached this stage in his embitterment, when the gown of beige taffeta appeared at the end of a path. Hélène Le Pleynier, a straw hat on her head and a cane in

her hand, seemed to be going out for a walk. She saw the two men, hesitated for a moment, responded with a rapid bow to Joseph's raising of his hat, and turned back towards the house. Joseph felt himself scorned, did not know why, and was conscious of a grudge against his host.

" That is my daughter," said M. Le Pleynier, his nose protruding, in a meaninglessly confidential tone. " A child of great merit. The poor girl is not leading a gay life with me, since her mother's death. I am not very entertaining company."

Joseph resented his thinking of himself when his daughter had just appeared.

" Have you not a son, Sir ? "

" To be sure. He is a lieutenant in the dragoons."

They reached the wooden gate. Joseph then realised that the stroll which they had taken through the garden had been arranged so as to conduct him off the premises. He felt the angry impulse of a child who sees that he has been fooled. He determined to regain the advantage, and said emphatically :

" Surely, Sir, you do not persist in refusing to accept our thanks over that affair of the Club ? "

What was his surprise to feel a hand laid upon his shoulder and to see an almost affectionate glance meet his own.

" Come, come ! Do not speak of that wretched business. But I am glad to see that you never own yourself beaten. That is what builds up character."

And at the moment when all Joseph's precautions were vanishing like a soap-bubble, when something akin to affection was beginning to master him, the old man pushed him gently through the gate, saying :

" Good-bye, good-bye, take care they don't crush you ! "

Whereupon he turned away and walked back to the house.

" What an absurd old man ! " Joseph almost shouted, on

the road, repressing a strong desire to laugh mingled with a sense of confusion. Ten paces farther on, he added, to himself : " And what an absurd house. . . ."

He made his way down the slope which leads from the high ground to the outskirts of Vendeuvre and the river which loiters past it.

The image of Hélène Le Pleynier crossed his mind : " What an absurd creature."

He crossed a street which recalled the somewhat painful memory of various Sunday evenings, in the past winter, during the worst period of their distress and toil. A slightly stale odour tickled his nostrils. He turned his head away, quickened his pace, and saw once again the dull gold of a neck between a white frill of pleated muslin and a woven tress of chestnut hair. He thrust this memory aside, however, with a trace of embarrassment. He preferred to concentrate his thoughts upon the furtive, sly, at the same time indulgent scrutiny of a pair of large violet eyes, shaded by dark lashes, in a fair, amber face.

It was in this state of mind that he passed through the gate of the factory and made his way into that convenient little porter's lodge. He removed his hat and greatcoat in a narrow passage, then opened a door and entered the sitting-room.

The half-closed shutters expelled from it all the gaiety of the spring afternoon. The air that slumbered in the room was sullen and cold. The shrouded chairs were drawn up in line as in the parlour of a school. On the mantelpiece, a meagre bunch of artificial flowers and foliage was gathering dust, one of Hermine's attentions, in a cheap porcelain vase. He thought of the garden on the Nantes road, of the budding rosery, of the branches of fresh leaves which Hélène Le Pleynier had just cut when he accosted her. He left the house, banging the door behind him, and made his way, without changing his brown jacket, towards the factory,

whose walls were humming and quivering with the effort of the looms, like the vibration of the May sun.

II

When he opened the wooden door, forty faces turned towards him. He discerned their motion only by the luminosity of the forty white faces. Each of the women seemed to be a part of the loom at which she was working and throbbed with the throbbing of the machine. The air trembled. Joseph's spectacles began to tremble upon his nose. The whiplash of the forty shuttles hissed and then cracked forty times a second. All these sounds were mingled in a roaring, steady clamour which filled the room to overflowing.

A remark that he had made to Le Pleynier, an hour ago, recurred to his mind: "That business we will have," and something stabbed his heart. What was the use of all this din if there was nothing solid underlying it?

His father was seated in the glazed office from which he overlooked the weaving-room. A foreman in a white overall stood by the side of his armchair. Hippolyte turned to his son with an air of weary severity:

"Four pieces spoiled this week. Your looms are worthless. Your uncle is complaining of the willy. Go and find him."

Without waiting for an answer, the manufacturer turned back to the rubicund foreman who was peering at the papers from between the bloodshot rims of his eyes.

"What kind of system of work is this? What are all these new habits and customs? It was not worth the trouble of changing the looms, if the women refuse to do any work."

"Julie Dadillon says that she is unwell. Célina Caillon is going to have a baby."

"*Dummkopf! Schlemihl!* You, Zeller, expect me to believe

such rubbish ? Upon my word, you are becoming as stupid as the natives ! "

" Monsieur Hippolyte . . ."

" Don't answer me back ! If Célina and Julie are unable to work, they can ask for their wages. My wife will take them soup. I would rather pay their doctor's bill than see them work badly. And Noémi, is she expecting, too ? Why does she turn out half a piece less every week ? And Adélaide Courtois, does she have her times too ? Or is it the little bunch of flowers on her loom that keeps her from working ? Just look, Zeller, look at the result I get out of it ! And Fernande Brébinaud, what's the matter with her that she doesn't settle down to her work ? And what's the matter with you that you don't look after all these creatures ? "

" Monsieur Hippolyte . . ."

The rubicund foreman played with a little wart on his unshaven chin.

" Enough, Zeller, not a word more ! You will pay off Fernande, Adélaide, Noémi, Angèle Buet, Marie Désétang, and you will tell Célina and Julie to come and speak to me downstairs, before they leave the place this evening."

" Am I to look out for substitutes ? "

" Who said anything about substitutes ? " cried Hippolyte in an outburst of rage. " We shall carry on with thirty-three looms, and if this sort of thing continues, tell them, Zeller, you understand, that I am prepared to close down twenty looms, but every one of those idle, good-for-nothing women is to clear out of my factory."

Zeller hesitated for a moment, fingered his wart, but bowed and left the office. The opening of the door admitted a brief roar from the looms. Joseph could see the glimmer of forty white faces turned towards the foreman as they had turned towards himself.

Monsieur Hippolyte angrily turned over one paper after another and growled : " *Chanef ! Chanef !* A land of

good-for-nothings. That's what it is to employ labour. I shall make a clean sweep, a clean sweep ! "

Then, without raising his head, or altering his tone :

" Have you received that order from Dupommereuil ? "

" No."

" No ? *Chanef ! Chanef !* Out with the lot of them ! Listen to me : the output has declined by one-third. That idiot Zeller notices nothing. As soon as the sun comes in through the windows, they forget all about weaving. And that customer at Tours, has he answered ? No ? "

" Bazin ? N—no."

" No ? *Chanef ! Chanef !* It is not seven of them that I shall turn out of the place ! Things are not going well, Joseph, not going well ! Even if they are doing less work, there are still too many of them at it. It is ten of them we must turn off this evening, not seven. Ten ! And Delmotte ? "

" I wrote again this morning."

" This morning. There's another of them that has gone to Elbeuf. I forbid you to write to Delmotte again. I shall do no more business with him."

" I have just come from Le Pleynier's."

" Ah ? "

Hippolyte had uttered this " ah ? " with the maximum of scorn. But his huge face contracted.

" A most friendly reception. I made your apologies, Papa. He's a rum customer. He wouldn't let me say a word. He pretends he has forgotten all about it. But the reception was perfect."

Joseph kept the rest of his observations to himself. Hippolyte, bent over his papers, listened to him with a strained attention. Notwithstanding this, he cut him short with : " What does all that matter now ? Backstairs gossip, and good time wasted. You would do better. . . . Look after the customers. Myrtil is waiting for you."

As he made his way down to the ground floor, Joseph met

Myrtil at the door of the spinning-room. His uncle thrust forward the eaves of his stubbly eyebrows and compressed his lips.

" Capital ! Is it a fine spring day in the country ? "

He opened the door and the spinning-room flung its roar in his face. Joseph followed him.

A machine rolled forward to meet him. The five hundred threads on the spindles seemed to stretch out with a whirling motion and stop the trolley ; a fever seized the machine ; the rotation of the winders was accelerated ; the drawn thread assumed the form of a silky and transparent funnel ; the trolley shook violently and set off again in the reverse direction to hurl itself beneath the frame of the machine. Boys kept pace with it at a run, joining the broken threads with a quick motion of thumb and forefinger.

Five other spinning machines were moving to and fro in the room. The precipitate and monotonous thud of the looms punctuated, from the floor above, the more restless rhythm of this other work.

The modest silence of a little white factory, buried among chestnut-trees, without either furnace or spinning-mill, could it be compared with the intoxication of this din ? It was a fine thing to have created all this. The elastic atmosphere rebounded upon the sunbeams. A universe of motes transmitted the slightest tremors across them. A score of workmen were controlling this magical disorder by careful supervision. A rich, bestial odour trembled like a jelly. Joseph set foot upon it delicately, not quite knowing where his body ended and the spinning began. The spring touched him with its finger-tips. If the May sun was vibrating round the walls, was not this the forge in which that vibration was created ? And was Joseph himself anything more than a molecule dancing in the heart of that warm and luminous vibration ?

The bang of a door cut short his dream ; a sound like that which a grindstone draws from a rusty knife rained upon

the young man ; Myrtil was speaking : " I congratulate you. You are looking well. Exercise does you good."

Where was now the elastic dance of the springtime upon the rhythm of the machines ?

" You gave me a commission, Uncle Myrtil, I . . ."

" I gave you nothing of the sort. What do I care about those *goyim ?* It is very kind of your father to take any notice of what they may think."

" Le Pleynier received me very correctly."

" My compliments. I see that you have not wasted your afternoon."

" Even if it does not help us in any way, it cannot do us any harm."

" Everything that is outside our work does us harm. A friendly *goy* has no more to do with us than a hostile *goy*. If business is good, they will all be friendly. And business allows nobody, here, to take a whole afternoon in the middle of the week to go out paying calls."

The last swayings of exhilaration die down. There is nothing now round Joseph, beyond those walls which close him in, but a roaring motion to and fro, full of menace. His uncle is right. Are the whole lot of them more than is necessary to maintain this devouring roar ? He bows his head to the lecture, and casts a terrified glance at his uncle over his spectacles.

" There is a . . . willy that is not working properly ? "

His uncle glares at him with animosity from the depths of the ravine that sears his face beneath his eyebrows.

" Nothing is working properly. Neither machines nor customers. If there were enough orders, nothing else would matter."

" But the willying . . ."

" The willying works well enough for all that is asked of it. Give it more work to do, you, the salesman, and then we can spend money on improving it. You may be sure it is

not working properly ! What does, in this place, in this cursed factory ? I've been talking to your brother. It's the same story in the dressing-room as in the spinning-room. This evening I shut down two machines."

Two machines in the spinning-room, seven weaving-mills, a carding machine, six fulling-mills, two combs shut down, seventeen workers thanked for their service, no reply from Dupommereuil, Delmotte or Bazin, nothing in the morning mail, nothing in the afternoon mail, and that distant racket to be maintained, such is the clearest thought in Joseph's mind when he returns to the Warehouse.

Might it not be, when all is said, apprehension that turned towards him, in the weaving-room, forty female faces ? And the so well co-ordinated effort of the score of workers in the spinning-room, has the time indeed come to disperse it ?

The odour of gum and mould that fills the Warehouse is not a stimulant for a wounded heart. Joseph passes into the office. He casts a glance at a bunch of white wallflowers which droop, faded, over the edge of a vase, a kindly attention by Sarah, never repeated. Is this what springtime can effect, aided by woman ?

He stirs a few papers with his finger, and straightens his spectacles on his nose. What madness ! Struggle, risk, faith. " There is nothing to be done, in business, except to live from hand to mouth, or lose one's capital." Could the prophet on the Nantes road have foreseen it ? But why make a sport of depressing people ? Live from hand to mouth, when a man was in debt for everything he possessed, even the shirt on his back ? It would be better . . . it would be better . . .

Joseph feels that he is too great a coward to adopt the final solution. A memory rises to his cheeks which flush crimson. With the full force of his lungs he heaves a deep sigh. He knows that he will have to return presently to Paris and there there is, to his knowledge, one place, at

least, where everything is forgotten, where a man can find happiness. What matters the quality of the happiness? The pleasure is in itself, the lips are servile. And so everything is not foreclosed, since this still exists.

The rattle of the door-handle brings him back to earth and to Vendeuvre. Hermine enters the room, apologising as she does so, with her slightly forced smile.

"Am I disturbing you?"

"Sit down."

"I have just looked in for a moment. I wanted to ask you. . . . But you're sure I'm not disturbing you?"

"Come, come, Hermine, you don't disturb me often enough."

She thanks him as she raises, timidly, to his face her grey-green eyes. Joseph feels that these eyes are sexless. He is weary, in anticipation of the time that this woman is going to spend with him. But he would accept to-day with gratitude the company of a bailiff. And besides, why should he not love his brother's wife with all his fraternal affection?

"I wanted to ask you . . . it is about that beige cloth for Justin's greatcoat."

"Of course. I had forgotten it. Will you come with me?"

Joseph, mounted upon a ladder, is turning over pieces of cloth. "For Laure, I want some light summer stuff, in grey, something in the line of a serge, have you got any?"

"A serge? Indeed, no. You must ask Uncle Wilhelm. He has received some Scotch tweeds which may perhaps take your fancy. . . ."

He comes down the ladder holding out a piece of cloth on his outstretched arms, like a child.

"See whether this is what you want."

"Oh, good gracious . . ."

She touches the stuff with her long white fingers punctuated with yellow.

" It is very heavy."

" Heavy ? Tintin is strong enough to carry two metres of this stuff without collapsing under the weight."

She laughed awkwardly at his joke. He continued : " Shall I cut you off two metres ? "

" Two metres, yes . . ."

" Two and a half metres, perhaps ? "

" Yes, perhaps two and a half. . . . But you say that Uncle Wilhelm . . ."

" If I see him, I shall ask him."

She has shut the door upon her smile of confused gratitude, and immediately Joseph is left motionless, his foot still on the ladder.

That, a woman ? Come, now ! Joseph recalls that never once, since his brother's betrothal, has it occurred to him that Hermine's bodice and skirt concealed a woman's body. A noble effect of brotherly love. But also, is not Hermine herself partly responsible ? Has there ever been, in the wise mother of his nephew and niece, anything more than a schoolgirl docility ? Are there not equally chaste corsets which cover far more throbbing bosoms ? A certain amber skin . . . ?

But there ! What is the use of all these thoughts ? Here is Joseph, transformed into a working man, who multiplies his activities in the Warehouse, carries the ladder about, brings down pieces, carries others back, alters labels, and hurriedly gathers together the samples for his next journey. Would you not say that Master Joseph Simler is seeking to banish some disturbing thought by dint of work and exhaustion ?

III

The white heat of two o'clock in the afternoon is as vertical as a flagstaff. The cry of the grasshoppers shoots its shrill points up at the sky and supports the motionless

weight of the zenith. The firmament opens with the colourless misery of a blind man's eyeball. The metal sheet of the earth's surface spreads its desolation beneath. All life is gathered up on it in the tension of an eternal moment. July holds Vendeuvre in the hollow of its hand.

And the child whose eyes are being seared through the shutters by the roasting macadam of the courtyard, may imagine that he alone survives in the world to gather the moments as they pass.

Nevertheless the dimness of the sitting-room behind him is peopled now and again with strange whisperings. And if he exhausts himself in the effort to penetrate with his mind the wall of sunshine that separates him from a huge building, half melted in the light, it is because a mystery full of anguish and ceremony is occurring inside it.

At noon, the men who had been absent all morning reappeared, with flushed faces and flashing teeth. They ate without uttering a word, mopping the sweat from their brows. Uncle Joseph was in his shirtsleeves. Papa cast stealthy glances at the plump little hands of Jacob Stern, and his own hand shook as he raised his glass. Afroum's wrinkles seemed to be expressing sardonic thoughts. His throat gripped tightly by his cravat, Great-uncle Myrtil was savager and more purple than ever. As for Grandpapa, better not to think about him.

With the coffee, little Uncle Wilhelm had arrived, and the whole party vanished, banging the door behind them.

"Justin, stay where you are!" a voice had said, a flat voice in which there was no trace of affection. Justin had stayed. But the society of women is a very poor substitute when one scents that there is man's work being done. Why, on this implacable Sunday, are *they* toiling with the sweat of their brows?

And so we find the child pressing his nose and lips against the window. But no sound filters in through the slats of the

closed shutters. The bayonet-sharp shrilling of the grasshoppers has long ago sunk into the heart of the silence.

However, Aunt Mina, Uncle Afroum's wife, is there, in the sitting-room, and more than one contentious memory is, in her honour, revived, related and discussed. Kindred, neighbours, Paris, the war, migrations, deaths, marriages, dowries and legacies, the East and the West are subjected, between one armchair and another, to a careful enumeration.

Hermine lets her chatter flow freely. Laure, too tightly repressed, laced from ankle to knee, listens, seated upon a low chair, and never takes her eyes from the plump form of Jacob's daughter, Elisa. Sarah expresses herself with reserve, because Mina, according to her habit, makes the others aware, by means of adroit speeches, of her own position in the scale of the cloth industry.

The fact is that the Sterns' two sons have not been long in breeding after their kind. The ex-lawyer has been marvellously fortunate on the pavements of Paris. He has gone into partnership with his brother. Jacob attends sales, at Sedan, Roubaix and Leeds ; Abraham, his wife and his niece look after the house in the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois ; Benjamin scours the country for four and five months on end. The ex-lawyer's smooth-shaven lips, short whiskers and professional secrecy have inspired confidence in his customers. His honesty crowns the whole. But their confidence is such that they would almost be ready to disperse with that.

Jacob and Afroum made their appearance at Vendeuvre in the early days of the migration, in the depressing period of the previous autumn. Their presence has regularly coincided, for the children, with days full of a solemn anxiety. Family councils have been held at unusual hours. On the third occasion, Papa came from the office, after dinner, to fetch Mamma and Grandmamma. The children sat up half

the night, alone and terrified, the lamp having suddenly spluttered and gone out.

And so when, two days ago, Grandpapa Hippolyte had come in, suddenly, holding a letter between his swollen fingers, and saying in a tone that suggested much hidden thought : " They are coming," Tintin had foreseen the rites and ceremonies of this strange day.

He repeats to himself until he is breathless, without succeeding in producing any cloud upon the warm glass : " What are they doing, what are they doing, what are they doing . . . ? "

He pictures to himself the interior of the factory and the lifeless mass of the looms, drawn up in line like the wagons on the square of the artillery barracks. The spinning-room is silent, and the traps of the fulling-mill no longer clatter under the pressure of the torrent of soapy water. And yet Papa mentioned that Zeller, Kapp, Braun and one or two others are there. Are they in white overalls or in their Sunday clothes ? Perhaps even in tail-coats and top-hats, as at the Gottlieb child's funeral ? And why have they come ?

" Tintin, be quiet ! "

He has heard this remark more than once.

" I am being quiet, I am being quiet, I am being quiet . . ." the child continues in a lower tone, stamping the pattern of his brow upon the glass, while the glare from the yard streaks his eyeballs with red and green bars.

Behind him the murmur of the women is mingled with the buzzing of flies round the lustre.

" Ever since those wretches decided not to admit Papa and Uncle Myrtil to their Club, there has been a sort of campaign," moans the melancholy Hermine. " Everyone has turned against us. If we had needed to engage a maid, we should not have found one. Those gentlemen don't lift their hats to us in the street. There have been words written on the walls of the factory. The carters, as they drive out of the

yard, mutter things we don't always understand. We have had to change our baker three times. They used rude words to Tintin."

" If I had not restrained my Joseph," says Sarah, " there would have been trouble."

" And Guillaume is so excitable ! Fortunately," Hermine continues, " Papa has never noticed anything."

" He has never noticed anything ? What a man ! " says Mina in a tone which reveals her devouring curiosity.

" Fortunately ! " says Sarah with an ambiguous smile ; " Hippolyte and my brother-in-law had troubles enough without that."

" This year will be set to their credit somewhere, Sarah ! " says Mina, while Elisa nods her head with an air of wise approval. " And please God they may not have laboured in vain ! "

" We shall know presently," the old woman goes on. " Yes, please God those poor boys may be rewarded for their labours. They deserve it."

And she is silent, stopping short on the threshold of lamentation, with a smile the quiet pride of which disarms her cousin.

Does a child's mind require any more than this to set it off on a roving errand between the slats of a shutter ? He has listened with a distracted ear. To be sure, Tintin has more than once had things said to him, when he went, on winter mornings, for the bread and the milk. And he has returned home more often than might be expected with his knuckles bruised by contact with the metal buttons of the jackets at the Brothers' School.

But is that of the slightest importance, now ? " We shall know presently," says Grandmamma. What is it that we are to know presently ? Whether Zeller is in his overalls or wearing a tall hat ? Why the Sterns have come to bore everyone to death with their presence ? Or why this Sunday is

being spent in buzzing like a bluebottle against a window-pane, while the men are taking part in heaven knows what exciting occupations ?

Good, there is cousin Elisa's voice drowning the whispers with its loud vulgarity.

She is so glad that she has been able to see Uncle Joseph several times during his visits to Paris, and at once begins to simper, in spite of the fact that Aunt Mina is rebuking her with dry little " ahems " in her throat.

Tintin pictures with animosity the smug face of admiration which Laure is raising towards the moist suet pudding of their cousin's face. Privately, he labels his sister with various animal names which her innocent profile does not yet deserve.

" Your brother, Sarah," Aunt Mina is saying, " looked to me as though he were satisfied with his business."

" He is so easily pleased," sighs Hermine. The kindly Mina knows what she has been seeking to learn, and Sarah's lips, on the point of opening, tighten.

But Tintin is no longer listening. A dull bang is heard coming from the wall of the factory, a step crunches the gravel, the boy dances into the room from his concealment behind the curtains.

" They are coming, it is all over, it is all over ! "

What is all over, Tintin does not know ; but he is not long in noticing the effect that his words have produced. Sarah has risen to her feet : " Already ! " she exclaims. Mina gazes at her with terror. Hermine clutches Laure's head convulsively. A key rattles in the lock. It is Papa. Tintin flies to the door. Papa enters the room.

" Guillaume ? Well ? " Sarah is unable to restrain the cry. But Guillaume's harassed air indicates that the task, whatever it may be, is not completed.

" I seem to have left a letter from Bellonet here," he barks under his moustache

" I thought so," murmurs Sarah. She sits down again and smiles at the two Parisians.

Papa carries off the letter. He leaves the door wide enough open to allow the slim form of a boy of nine to escape in his wake. The next thing to happen is that Tintin receives upon his head something that feels like a sandbag. And who can have played this joke of pumping all the air out of the yard ? But one soon grows used to the three o'clock sun and the heat of a July day.

The outer gate is shut, a circumstance which always fills the boy with misgivings. Groups of people in their Sunday clothes are standing about on the avenue. The men seem to be well disposed. The long face of a little boy rises between two bars of the gate. It draws attention to Tintin, and grins from ear to ear. A woman's voice is heard explaining : " It is the Simlers stock-taking."

Tintin is unable to breathe until he has shut the door of the warehouse behind him.

Buried in a restful darkness and coolness, Uncle Joseph is running up and down the oak ladder. He shifts pieces of cloth and declaims in a cross tone numbers and letters which Pouppelé jots down grubbily in pencil on the back of a washing bill.

" Go on writing, I shall make a fair copy later. PL 328, General Prym 14, got that ? Prym 14,750, in the last column."

He is streaming with sweat ; his shirt gapes open exposing his hairy chest.

" What are you going here, you little rascal ? Get out. . . ."

Tintin flies. He plunges once more into the furnace, follows the inside wall of the yard, and slips into the spinning-room through the door with the iron pig.

A churchlike silence. The machines are asleep between their tall wheels. The flat rails are thrust forward like arms.

Tintin loves them. He loves the rigid stiffness of the pasteboard winders and their steel bands polished by friction. He stretches out his hand towards that immaterial pulp which comes down to the winders, which is neither hair nor yarn, which yields to the finger like a cobweb, but gives a warm and rich caress.

"Don't you dare!" a harsh voice warns him. Uncle Myrtil appears from behind a machine, followed by Kapp, his shadow, and by one of those beastly Sterns. The uncle lowers the visor of his brow and fastens his great-nephew.

Once again the furnace. Rather than go upstairs to the weaving-room, and face the bloodshot eye of Grandpapa, Tintin would prefer to pass by the gate a second time.

And so when at last there arrives, without a breath of air, the end of this inexorable day, the boy is nothing more than a lump buried in the stifling darkness of the boiler-house. It is a favoured spot; from it one commands the great fly-wheel, the sixteen cables that pass round it and escape from it by the two holes pierced in the upper part of the wall.

These cables go out, upon weekdays, to distribute the power that is generated by the piston. Tintin Simler follows each of them in his mind, in the rectilinear and circular effects of its velocity. He hangs on to them and allows himself to be drawn through the dark hole, then through the space beyond, interminably, returning finally to revolve at full speed round the fly-wheel. And he perspires with heat, fear and pride; for the person who stands here, where the cables meet, is at the centre of everything and is master of the factory. What then can a stock-taking be if it is concerned with everything, save the great fifteen-foot fly-wheel? When there are people looking into everything, save the ball-bearings?

Voices pass outside the door. He scrambles out of his brick oven, follows them, and sees in front of him the

members of the firm making their way to the Office. A minute later, he is in the warehouse, where Uncle Joseph is represented only by a pair of cuffs as rigid as zinc.

The door of the Office is merely pushed to. The boy slips his nose through the chink, and withdraws it quickly in order not to be seen by little Uncle Blum, whose sharp eye does not overlook even so slight a movement.

A vast silence, broken by heavy breathing, fills the room. Four of the gentlemen are seated before sheets of paper black with figures. Another stands by each of them, and checks his calculations. A buzz of muttered numbers flows along the floor. Sometimes one of them emphasises the penultimate syllable of a " carry forward " : " *Twenty*-five," then turns a page, and the prayer-wheel starts again. The foremen are no longer present. Anyhow, they were in their overalls, and were not wearing tall hats.

The sawyer looks only at the back of his saw and never bows his head to contemplate the work that he has done. So long as the gleaming back of the saw covers exactly the whole length of the edge, he goes on with his work. Similarly, the four men who were seated in the room had been gazing steadily at the back of the saw ; for the first time in six months, they were allowing themselves time to inspect the result.

This much the boy understands from the silence that emanates from those men, and from something else besides which is in himself. He does not know why he has become almost faint.

One of the men—Uncle Myrtil, so far as he can judge—says : " Ah ! " and heaves a more hollow sigh. Two of the others in turn show that they have finished their addition and sit erect on their chairs, waiting in silence.

Justin feels that his father is the last to complete his calculations. His heart contracts at the sound of that stammering

voice, the mistakes which his father is making in his nervousness and which the little old uncle corrects in an undertone.

Finally, Guillaume too has finished. The light is beginning to fade. The men gather round the armchair of Hippolyte, who collects the sheets of paper in his hand. Justin feels afraid.

A growl passes over their heads. It swells for a moment, then dies away. You would think that something was in its death-agony. Hippolyte utters a muffled oath. A long minute elapses. Then a thick, unrecognisable voice rises tremulous, but with the immense force of a cathedral organ : " *Gott sei dank ! Gott sei dank !* Myrtil ! "

A confused noise keeps the boy rooted to the ground. Men are kissing one another, arms are stretched out, nothing is heard but stifled gasps and sobs.

" Myrtil, *Kinder*, Afroum, Jacob, Wilhelm ! "

The old man seizes their shoulders in his arms, his whiskers rasp their faces. Justin does not know whether everything is finished for ever. But a triumphant voice breaks out suddenly in a discord :

" And Sarah ! " exclaims the clubfoot. " We must tell Sarah ! "

Then, like the cry of a wild beast from the heart of a forest, a roar fills the two rooms and rends the boy's heart :

" Tell her, Wilhelm ! Seventeen thousand francs, in nine months ! And that the boys will be as rich as kings ! Tell her, Wilhelm, go and tell her ! "

IV

A RIVER DOES NOT SWEEP DOWN THE WATER OF ITS SPRING floods between the flanks of its valley with a more savage joy than that of the Simlers when, during the week that followed, they gave rein to their feelings.

Seventeen thousand francs is not a fortune. There was nothing perhaps, at first sight, to justify the patriarch in his wild cry.

But these seventeen thousand francs represented the net profit, after interest had been paid on the debt, and a certain sum placed to reserve. Nor did they even represent a full working year.

In any case it meant a livelihood, with some provision for the future.

And so the Simlers opened their bosoms to the flowing tide of hope. Hippolyte recovered, by nightfall, his youthful laugh, and made the windows rattle. Myrtil provided the children with the great surprise of hearing him sing an old Alsatian song, and Blum beat all his former records for ingenuity by arriving with two long-necked bottles of Kitterlé. As for Mina, she had made all her preparations for flight in the event of a disastrous balance-sheet. She found it natural and pleasant to prolong her stay.

They dined so late, on the evening of the stock-taking, that Justin and Laure were drooping with their noses in their plates, when the foremen began to arrive, in batches, wearing their Sunday clothes and a stiff, formal expression. The first glance reassured them, so far as they themselves were concerned. Each of them acted then according to his nature.

Zeller was there, rubicund, martial, cold and satisfied, Kapp waggling his long red nose with a joyous and sagacious air, Pouppelé like a good and faithful dog, his round head covered with tumbling locks of hair, Gottlieb in mourning, but his chin gleaming with the action of white wine, Fritz Braun, with his dyer's hands and his loyal flaxen moustaches, and the old book-keeper Hermann, bursting with the desire to go outside and triumph noisily among his peers.

It was decided that Tuesday should be a half-holiday, but on full pay. This announcement succeeded in awakening

the children, who tossed for a long time between their clinging sheets in the scorching atmosphere of the little room in which they slept.

After Sunday, there was Monday, on which they awoke late and already baked by the sun. After Monday, there was Tuesday, which did not arrive without witnesses, but was watched for, from a skylight window, from the first break of dawn, by four eyes aflame with desire.

And the midday siren, which dispersed the workers fan-wise from the gate, did not lack an echo.

The fact was that gaiety had now a fine revenge to take. A whole year hung behind it like a debt which was to be wiped out in an instant. And what a year ! Since the battle of Wissembourg, the sun had never yet shone upon a day free from anguish. An air was circulating at last which was beginning not to be the property of others ; lips could now part in laughter and lungs expand.

And so it was with an exciting shock that, as soon as he had drunk his coffee, Joseph's heel rang on the pavement, while he hastened towards a mysterious goal. And each step that he took released a little eruption of white dust which seemed to assert a sort of further control of the external world.

The deference that had been paid to the Simlers, during the last two days, did not extend beyond a certain zone. In ranging as far afield as M. Antigny, who rented carriages, young Simler was entering unexplored territory.

But just as there are coloured glasses which allow only a certain number of rays of light to pass through them, so Joseph's spectacles seemed to be made of some subtle substance against which the most malicious intentions were shattered.

These spectacles had observed quite plainly, from a distance, in the streets, how M. Pierrotin gave a jump, and the sudden curiosity that seized that worthy secretary when

he recognised young Simler. Nor did the rage with which M. Huillery turned away his head, at the corner of the Rue de la Bretonnerie, escape them either.

They remained impenetrable however to the horse-owner's attempts at insolence.

" Will he take us as far as the forest of l'Epine ? " asked Joseph, as he gazed with a pitying air at the knock-kneed animal which a groom was harnessing to the brake.

" It is Monsieur himself that intends to drive ! " replied the ex-sergeant of the Impératrice dragoons.

" It is," Joseph assured him, with a glance at the man's yellow leggings.

" In that case . . ."

A slight hiss of his whip gave their full meaning to these three monosyllables.

" He is very thin."

" I feed my horses, but there are thin *mares* just as there are fat men."

" He has no vice ? "

M. Antigny had exhausted his small stock of patience.

" That depends. If you drive *her* badly, *she* will land you in the ditch like any of them."

The groom, anxious for a tip, interposed, from between the legs of the resigned animal, where he was strapping the girth : " No need to be afraid with this beast ! But with a driver from the stable, who'd have her well in hand, you'd get far better satisfaction."

Joseph turned abruptly towards the dilapidated brake, while the groom went on, with a sly chuckle : " She'll trot right enough on the road home."

" This carriage is very old. Haven't you got anything more . . . decent ? "

This unfamiliar realm of business made him ill at ease. M. Antigny had stepped back a few paces to master in an ostensible fashion the contempt in which he held this

strange type of customer. He pinched his nose as he answered :

" I can put a mail-coach at your disposal."

" I mean another brake," replied Joseph with a mild firmness. " This one . . ."

" Pardon me ! Are we speaking of a brake ? This carriage is called a wagonette."

" Indeed ? But I ordered a brake."

" Is Monsieur taking his family out ? "

" Y . . . es. What has that got to do with it ? "

" Your family won't get inside my brake. But that doesn't matter : Eugène, unharness."

Joseph saw red. He cracked one of the knuckles of his right hand in the hollow of his left.

" I did not tell you to unharness, but to show me a carriage less dirty than the one you have there."

M. Antigny found accents of a sovereign phlegm in which to order :

" Jules, bring out the tilt-cart."

The bare arms of the grooms swelled with muscular effort round a pole and four wheels. A tilt-cart big enough to convey a choir-treat, thundered over the cobbles of the yard and halted, foundering in a gutter of liquid manure.

Then Joseph remembered that there were certain ugly rumours anent the business methods of M. Antigny, who was said to be sacrificing to the Queens of Spades and Hearts far more than the prosperity of his establishment allowed. And when he recalled the circumstances that brought him, Joseph Simler, into this stable-yard, there arose in him a joyous, irresistible force, comparable to the laughing ripple of an evening breeze on the surface of a lake. He looked round the yard blithely, and said : " I shall take the wagon."

Then he made them take the carriage out into the street, mounted the box and took up the reins with less awkwardness than the stableman expected to see.

As for the ex-sergeant-major, as soon as he had received the sum which he demanded in advance, he had let it be seen from his attitude that the cream of the farce was at an end in his eyes. He had withdrawn with dignity into his private office furnished with pipes, English engravings, a chair with a broken seat, an old iron stove, a porcelain racehorse on the chimney-piece, two evil-smelling fox-terriers, curled up on ragged mats, and a considerable quantity of old bridles, rusty spurs, broken curbs and whips.

" And they'll all be behaving like that worm," Joseph said to himself, as he urged the old screw in the direction of the factory. He added with disgust : " A town of rascals ! " but did not succeed in suppressing the feeling of happiness which was making his head swim.

The brake creaked and rattled and made an infernal din. It was sufficient to bring the children to the windows, not sufficient to damp their enthusiasm.

Decidedly Uncle Joseph had not his match in the matter of inventions. It was impossible to imagine a coachman more proud of his occupation. Laure climbed up from behind on to the box and kissed him on the cheek.

" You are all wet ! " she cried, tapping him on the shoulder with the tips of her fingers. A cloud of dust rose from it and made her sneeze. They both of them burst out laughing. Justin stood in readiness at the mare's head, as though he were holding the charger of the Quatre Fils Aymon.

" You know, Cousin Benjamin has just come," Laure went on. At that moment, a sly, smiling face, red as a pantile, appeared framed in one of the windows. The family gathered round this fresh witness of their success. Joseph felt a painful contraction at the pit of his stomach. He greeted his cousin nevertheless with a gay wave of his whip. The other responded with a smile which seemed a grimace and wrinkled up his face like a venetian blind.

" Hallo, coachman, come down and let us give you a kiss."

" Hallo, passenger, come up and let me give you a kiss."

" I have come in the nick of time, it seems."

" You always come in the nick of time," replied Joseph, sardonically. Benjamin encircled with a more pronounced smile the gleaming potato which served him for a nose, and made a comical gesture of menace at the driver : " You, Chosef . . ."

He exaggerated his Alsatian accent. The family stood blissfully looking on at this exchange of banter. As for the real feeling that lurked beneath these provocations, it went beyond the sphere of their competence.

" All aboard ! " cried Joseph.

" All aboard ! " Laure screamed, casting a flashing glance at Benjamin over her uncle's shoulder on which she was leaning.

The women had meanwhile piled up a mountain of shawls, rugs and cushions.

" You'll have us all in the ditch. This old screw can never draw all that load ! " Joseph protested.

" Don't forget the thermometer," Justin went one better.

" And the hot-bottle for our feet ! " cried Laure in her shrillest tones. It was a day of Saturnalia. The slaves were mocking their masters. But a day that knew no morrow. . . .

A few workmen, who had come back, having nothing else to do, after their midday meal, had stopped on the other side of the avenue. They looked on, good-humouredly, at this spectacle.

The appearance of a hamper of food calmed the automedon. He had his work cut out to trim the vehicle, when the passengers, armed with umbrellas and sunshades, scrambled into the brake.

Mina Stern sat behind Joseph, with Myrtil facing her. Guillaume took his place on his cousin's left, having Hermine opposite him. Afroum was next the door on Hermine's side, Elisa on Guillaume's. She had asked for this place

with a deliciously childish air " so as to get a better view of the country." Benjamin took his place on the box, by the side of Joseph, and set Laure on his knee, while Tintin found, between the two men, a scrap of scorching wood on which to seat his slender anatomy.

Hippolyte and Sarah would have nothing to do with this excursion. They had presided over the start, from the window, in company with Jacob Stern. Little Uncle Blum had been unable to find, in the state of his own affairs, any valid excuse for losing half a working day. He had nevertheless promised to join them in the forest, at five o'clock.

The brake quivered on its back springs, grinding up the black dust from the roadway, and the party were left in doubt, for a full minute, as to whether the reins would hold. The children shouted : " Courage, ahi, hue, pull ! " until Uncle Myrtil was moved to order :

" *Stiegen, Kinder,* silence ! "

Sitting erect in the stiff casing of his frock-coat and beneath the ægis of his silk hat, his hands folded over the silver knob of his pear-wood cane, he personified the statue of industrial respectability.

Finally the four wheels began to turn and the whole party vanished in a moment from the sight of the old people. Until the first corner was reached, Mina, Hermine, and Elisa had waved their handkerchiefs, and Guillaume the back of his hand, but without ceasing, in his case, to watch Uncle Myrtil's expression and to conform to it. Abraham kept a sharp look-out upon everything, with a smiling, crafty attention.

V

The slope up to the station brought the carriage to a crawling pace. Benjamin turned his mocking face to Joseph.

" Well, weaver, may we congratulate you ? "

" You may," replied Joseph laconically, without taking his eyes off the mare's crupper.

" Do you know that, for the first year, it's quite decent ? "

Joseph knew it. He knew indeed that the sentiment which had possessed them all, on the evening before last, had nothing " decent " about it. He could not help tossing his head, and said, with a trace of sadness in his voice : " You are always the same, Benjamin."

The other shook his own round, red head : " In what respect, my good Joseph ? I maintain that, given the conditions, the environment, the possibilities, you have not got out of it badly."

" And you, are you satisfied ? " said Joseph, to turn the conversation.

" Always the same jogtrot. Given the conditions, the environment, the possibilities, one has done one's little best."

Joseph thought : " He is getting out of it. At his leisure," and was silent, feeling vexed.

The children followed the conversation, turning to look at each speaker in turn. This silent jury weighed upon their uncle.

Behind them, the brake was ahum with speech. People turned to gaze at them. They were not accustomed to seeing the Alsatians outside their own quarters, still less to seeing them holiday-making. A boy chanted :

" *Voilà les Guidal*
Qui s'en vont au bal."

Shopkeepers hurried out to their doorsteps. Joseph, as the driver, had to endure laughter and criticism. Elisa's plump figure earned her several compliments.

And M. des Challeries, whom they met unexpectedly in the neighbourhood of the railway station, turned away his

head, quickened his pace, and whistled to his collie which was going to sniff at these dubious persons.

Meanwhile Benjamin was taking in everything with his red, monkey-like eye. He shrugged his shoulders.

" A mere matter of working days. The result follows as ' in my snuff-box ' follows ' good snuff.' "

" I don't understand you."

" This country is not worth a tinker's dam. Everything here goes by foresight and consequences. It is not life, I don't know what it is, geometry maybe. You raise the capital, you put it into building and stock, you cling on to it, like a hanged man on his rope, you never raise your nose for three-hundred-and-five, six or seven days (not forgetting Sundays and public holidays), and then you triumphantly gather in the little profit foretold by Nostradamus and le Vieux Major. Hey, presto ! Nothing in my pockets, gentleman, nothing up my sleeve. Do you call that life ? You were gazing at that coxcomb who stopped his nose as we passed, with his English penny cigar and his hair parted down the back ? I don't know who he is, but I'm willing to bet that, in ten years, you will have ruined him. It's mathematics ; besides you can see it written on his face. Seventeen thousand this year, it's a little nest egg. Next year fifty thousand, in ten years your turnover will be five millions, and you will have two hundred thousand to divide among yourselves. You can lie down and sleep, you, or your father, or your uncle, who seems to be repeating his catechism behind my back, it will make no difference. Because this is an old country, and what has once been begun continues of its own accord until the life of the world is extinct. That is why I am so bored here, why I knew that the war would be won by the Germans who are a young people, and why the Germans will be beaten by the Americans who are younger still."

He burst out laughing, and turned his potato-like nose

in the direction of Joseph, whom his remarks were suffocating.

" Keep to the right, giglamps, or these aristocrats who are coming along at full trot will heave you into the ditch with the entire firm of Simler. And don't upset yourself. What I have said is what everybody knows to be true."

Joseph gave a docile tug to his horse. But when you have been living in the conviction that nothing can come up to what you have just brought off, you cannot look on unmoved at the destruction of your ideal.

Then, as they had reached the top of the hill, he whipped the animal into a trot, and was not sorry that the rest of the conversation was drowned by the rattling of the carriage.

" All very fine, principles. In the meantime you work like a horse, and your stock-taking was superb.

" Patience ! That poor devil Lambert has handed in his checks. That, look you, is the only aspect of the question that deserved mention. Lambert was an honest man, a man who did his duty, and as brave as a lion ; you don't see that sort any more. Enough said ! I was within ten feet of him, sniping, and I could do nothing for him. There's nothing I can do for him now. And so, silence ! "

Tintin stared with awe at the cousin who had been in battle within ten feet of that poor Lambert.

Joseph was not by nature inclined to bitterness. But there was, in this topic, more than he was able to endure. He began again, thrusting his spectacles on to his forehead, to which they remained glued, and raising his voice to drown the rattle of the wheels :

" You were heroes, Lambert and yourself. Others were left trapped like beasts, in the wake of the invasion, and had to devour their hearts for eight months."

" There is no such thing as heroes. There are men who march straight ahead and halt when there is nothing more

to be done. I have heard some story of a shirt flung over the head of a Badische attorney. That is not so bad. I only had to follow, halt, fire and run, squealing like a pig, from a fixed bayonet. Lambert had his dose, I am still here. Four paces more to the left, and people would be saying : ' That poor Benjamin,' instead of saying : ' That poor Lambert,' and Lambert would have no need to play Benjamin, as Benjamin has to play Lambert."

" Don't swagger, Benjamin," replied Joseph, thoroughly angered. " Lambert was everything that could be said in his praise. But if he had remained in this world, there would be two of you to do what you are doing single-handed."

" A cigar ? " said Benjamin, offering his cigar-case with a simultaneous gesture to Joseph and Tintin. " Do you know, my little mannikin," he went on, addressing Tintin this time, but without looking at him, " what it is that makes life worth the trouble of living ? I am going to tell you, I, Stern, Benjamin, of Turckheim, Haut-Rhin, who knows what he is saying and speaks only when he is sober : it is, first of all, to construct the machine, and then to break it. Don't pull your beast like that," he added ironically in the direction of Joseph, who at once grew nervous. " We, the Sterns, set up a machine. That's all right for me. It's a life that suits me. But when the machine is going, and they have no more need of me, I hitch up my pants, and off I go ! "

" Where to ? " said Joseph, as though he were giving the other a kick.

" Where ? To Valparaiso, Melbourne, Boston, the Cape, Honduras, wherever results do not follow foresight, as a man follows his nose, where it is possible to work from morning to night without having to earn a fortune."

" That is play, not work," growled Joseph from the depths of his chest.

" It is the true form of work, Joseph. You don't love the

machine, you only love what the machine produces. You don't love work, you only love the fruits of your work. You will be rich, very rich, until the day . . ."

"Until the day?"

"When Tintin parts his hair behind and starts buying English dogs . . ."

M. Antigny's mare never knew what was responsible for the lash of the whip that stung her flanks. The want of understanding that divided her already from her driver was from that moment intensified. In her obtuse equine mind, this outing began to take a definite shape.

"It's idiotic, what you're saying," growled Joseph.

"To Toul!" cried Benjamin, in response to a question which the brake had left suspended in the air, for a moment, and which the little man's alert mind had picked up. "Must I repeat it a hundred times? The Lévys of Ingwiller at Nancy, the Sterns of Turckheim in Paris, the Fränkels of Bischwiller at Elbeuf, the Aarons of Colmar at Epernay, the Simlers of Buschendorf at Vendeuvre, the Weils at Sedan, and a Dreyfus, a Spire, a Jacob, a Blum, a Hirtz, a Hertz, a Kahn wherever the archangel has scattered them—is that what you were asking? The chosen people are regular slaves for work. I assure you that, as far as knowing the geography of the Promised Land goes, our revered ancestors ought to have known it by heart before they even reached it. It's positively stupendous, this redispersal of the tribes! We had gathered together a regular little *kile* in the last generations, between Basel and Treves. We were quietly becoming citizens, burgesses, proprietors, mayors—all the honours. And then, bang! the Everlasting becomes angry and sends us packing to five hundred thousand devils. To think that we are all going to *begin* by becoming as rich again as Crœsus and as stupid as pigs! A true stroke of fate that. There is a *moschelisch* about it."

Thereupon a silence fell over the brake, because you can

keep all Israel quiet, from the East End of London to the Dead Sea, with a well-told tale. And Benjamin had a reputation as a great teller of *moschelisches*.

" Listen then to my *moschelisch*, O ye of little faith. Once upon a time the devil appeared on earth and was arrested, for some disgraceful business. Then he found three men, a Protestant, a Catholic, and a *Yid*, to get him out of his trouble. And when he was set free, he gathered them round him and said to them : ' Before I leave you, I wish to give you each a proof of my gratitude. You will see that I am not such a bad devil, after all. Choose, therefore, each of you, what it is that you want most in the world, and your wish will at once be granted.'

" Then he began : ' You, the Protestant, what would you like most ? ' And the Protestant answered : ' I wish to have power upon earth.' ' Good,' said the devil, ' that is easily done. Power you shall have. And you, the Catholic ? ' ' I ? ' said the Catholic, ' I, it is riches that I desire.' ' Bah ! Bah ! ' said the devil ; ' you shall have all the money you want. And you, the Jew ? ' ' I ? ' said the Jew, bowing, ' I ask one little thing only.' ' What is that ? ' ' Well, give me the Catholic's address.' "

Whereupon they all laughed, looking at one another with eyes of happiness, as it has been in their blood to do in such circumstances, from the days of Abraham, and before.

Joseph, meanwhile, continued to feel a red, monkeyish eye fixed upon him, and to feel some discomfort. But they had reached the woods. There followed two hours of respite for Joseph, the mare and the cousin.

The party alighted, and shook off the dust which covered them from head to foot. Myrtil Simler paraded solemnly in his frock-coat with Afroum, while Elisa flaunted her coquetry in Joseph's honour, before the indignant but powerless eyes of Mina Stern. As for the children, they were greatly

astonished to discover that a man who had fought in the war and spoke indifferently about going to the ends of the earth, could be an inexhaustible inventor of games.

Even Joseph himself, relieved by this diversion, entered into it whole-heartedly, ended by taking off his coat and collar and jumping the ditches with a surprising agility, in view of his weight. As for Guillaume, after various attempts, he consoled himself for his incompetence in such matters with the perfectly easy conversation of the people of age and experience.

At the stroke of five, the two Blums put in their appearance, in the guise of a humble party that had arrived on foot, arm in arm, very tired and dusty. The provisions were unpacked, and this scene furnished more than one passer-by, that evening, with an opportunity for impertinent descriptions.

Then, when the time had come, they all stowed themselves in the brake, and Joseph took the reins. But the mare had had time to think. She displayed an evident ill-will. Roused by the convergence of all eyes upon himself, Joseph began pulling in every direction, which proved disastrous. Benjamin whispered advice, to which Laure and Tintin gave a blaring publicity. The women felt that the moment had come for them to scream. Myrtil stood up in the brake, Guillaume cried : " Look out ! " After a more stinging lash from the whip, the mare, who was backing determinedly, deposited the brake in the ditch, one wheel after the other. Uncle Myrtil tumbled over the side, with his frock-coat and silk hat.

The Blums hastened to the spot. The passengers were rescued, as best they might. After everyone had decided that the beast would listen to no argument, Benjamin expressed the opinion that she must be unharnessed. Tintin, greatly to his father's anxiety, was detailed to hold the quiet animal by the head, a few paces away. Uncle Blum lifted the

shafts, Benjamin, Afroum and Joseph put their shoulders to the wheels, without any result.

Heroic measures were required. Joseph for the second time took off his coat, waistcoat and collar, and everyone but himself admired the strength of the biceps which he revealed when he rolled up his shirtsleeves.

Only the back wheels of the brake were in the ditch. Joseph stepped down into it, became rather flushed, folded his spectacles, handed them to his sister-in-law, and stooped down to grip the step. The sweat streamed from his temples.

At that moment, Afroum shouted : " Let this carriage pass ! "

Joseph, without straightening his back, raised his honest, short-sighted eyes.

Along the road, over which the sun was setting in a cloud of dust, a dogcart was approaching at full speed, driven, with taut reins, by an old man with white whiskers and a broad-brimmed hat. A girl, in a plain dress, was seated on his left, without a sunshade. Three dogs thrust their gaping jaws between the wicker bars of their basket.

It was not even necessary for the unusually high box-seat to make these people clearly visible. Joseph had guessed who they were, and flushed a deep crimson.

The old man showed an instinctive surprise, but was unable to pull up his horse until he had passed them by some thirty yards.

Joseph had detected this action. He bowed his bull-like neck, gripped the step of the brake in both hands, and with a mighty thrust, lifting the heavy carriage, steadying its oscillation, placed it in position on the road. Elisa had uttered a shrill cry.

Guillaume ran along the road, after the strangers, without thinking of what he was saying : " There's no need . . . Go on . . . It's all right now ! "

Mc

The old man made a gesture of polite regret, picked up the reins, and the dogcart bore away, in a cloud of dust, the barking of the dogs, the grand manner of their master, and the indulgent, uneasy smile of the girl in the brown silk dress.

"I always knew that he was as strong as a Turk," said Abraham Stern. "But this time he has surpassed himself."

They all gazed with awe at Joseph. M. Antigny's Vendevoriate mare had done enough for one day. She slavered abundantly on the hands of the disgusted Justin. She allowed herself to be harnessed, and finally carried back to the worn pavements of Vendeuvre a cart-load of weary, thirsty, anything but comfortable folk.

In the meantime, little Uncle Blum, having taken in the hollow of his own arm the plump arm of little Aunt Babette, was making his way home, on foot, to his house on the plain of Saint-Simplicien. But he raised his head and remarked, as he went, to his wife, who did not contradict him: "Babette, at Buschendorf, our Chosef used not to hire a horse and carriage, and blush when *goy* girls stared at him."

As for Joseph, if he remained silent on the box, this afternoon had furnished him with at least three excuses for silence. The best excuse was not that which Tintin supposed.

VI

Whether it was the fact of his having passed the Simler family in such remarkable circumstances, or the impressive report of their stock-taking, for one reason or another, M. Le Pleynier reproached himself with not having visited the Alsatians in return for Joseph's call. But, what with one thing and another, he put off the execution of this plan until an afternoon in September, when he sallied forth in his dogcart along the road to Vendeuvre, with the faithful Hilaire behind.

He left both cart and man outside the Club, and proceeded slowly on foot towards the establishment of the late lamented Poncet.

A slight storm was brewing beneath the bronze lid of the sky. The premature redness of the chestnut leaves testified to the rigours of an implacable summer. The great cedar of the Aubugeois de la Borde raised aloft over the top of the wall a plaster mould of itself in coagulated dust. The tension of the atmosphere found expression at moments in a whirling dance of fallen leaves, which at once settled down again.

The familiar escort of place and buildings gave M. Le Pleynier an increase of confidence as he went on. The work of the looms was communicated to the earth around ; torrents of black smoke poured from the chimneys ; gusts of warm odour reached the nostrils ; everything was as it had always been.

He passed by the flawlessly symmetrical walls of the Lorilleux-Pommier spinning-mill, and appreciated the full-bodied roar that came from within. A string of loaded lorries blocked the monumental approach to the Sabouret combing-mill. He thought of a witticism that was going the rounds at the expense of Adrien Sabouret, and laughed in his whiskers. A glance in the direction of their three chimneys reassured him as to the activity that was shaking the tall buildings of Chevalier-Lefombère.

He passed by a small café, stepped over a gutter that ran deep in scalding refuse, and cast a very different glance at the lane from which the stream emerged. It was a crooked blind-alley, damp and sunless in the very height of summer. A dilapidated wall flanked it along half its length.

M. Le Pleynier smiled for the second time. The essential part of his life had to all appearance been lived in the two silent storeys of the factory which this wall concealed. A mere episode in the sequence of time. He attached to it no

more than a distinctly ironical importance. His egoism had the insolent refinement of regarding everything in its relation to himself while not reckoning himself as anything at all.

He was no less satisfied by the discovery that nobody had taken possession of this old ruin than by the sight of the rival factories carrying on as he had always seen them, neither more nor less. Not a chimney more against the horizon, nor a new roof beneath the leaden sky. Not a wall-flower was missing from the chinks between the whitewashed bricks. The wild bees were nesting beneath the same tiles. The same coachman, the same porters greeted the old man as he passed.

To be sure the little Morindet girl was a charming creature, as he had seen her just now, trotting meekly by her mother's side, in her rippling frock of silver-grey silk, with her kerchief folded over her nascent bosom, and her little flat hat, with its pink feather, poised on her thick brown tresses. But there had been pretty women in the days of his own youth ; there would be pretty women still, long after he had rotted away in some hole in the ground.

Nothing made any difference to anything ; and, for that very reason, everything deserved the effort of a light and careful scrutiny.

And so " the Le Pleynier incident," as he styled himself, felt his heart fairly buoyant as he came in sight of the Simler factory. And it was precisely at the moment when he least expected it that he was fated, that day, to receive a surprise.

For not a soul was stirring in the factory of the " Prussians," which stood silent and empty, with blank windows and closed gates.

" Hallo ? " he grunted, as he tapped the ground with his stick. The entrance had been put in apple-pie order. A coat of still dazzling whitewash on the pillars of the gate, a wash of paint on the ironwork, the woodwork repainted, windows

mended and the soil freshly metalled. But an air of threadbare poverty still hung about those commonplace buildings. The shutters of the dwelling-house were closed.

M. Le Pleynier gathered in these details with a sweep of his little pig's eyes, and inhaled a draught of air.

" Humph ! " he said for the second time, in a tone of distrust. And he rang the bell at the little door of painted sheet-iron.

A long time passed without anything happening. No sign of life behind the iron door. The martins were flitting to and fro, over the ground. As they passed, they made the sound of scissors ripping silk. Behind him Vendeuvre was shaking from the impact of a hundred thousand spindles. He rang a second time. A doubt occurred to his mind :

" Can it be . . . ? "

But there was a creak of turning hinges, a light footfall approached and the door opened. A child's startled face appeared. He had curled hair, and dark, drooping eyelids. His mouth cut across his face like a recent wound.

" Are the Messieurs Simler visible, my young friend ? " asked M. Le Pleynier, as he removed his broad-brimmed hat. He handed a card to the boy, who retired without uttering a word.

The caller followed.

At the top of the steps that led to the house, the boy turned round and murmured something inaudible.

" What a damned silly idea to dress children up like that," the old man said to himself. A stale cold air enveloped him as soon as he set foot in the hall. And if he had been prepared for many spectacles, the spectacle which was in store for him upset many of the ideas upon which he was in the habit of basing his judgments.

The door of a sort of drawing-room had been left open by the boy. The shutters and curtains plunged the room in a darkness that was barely punctuated by the little flickering

lights of a seven-branched candlestick placed upon the chimneypiece. Two other candles seemed to be burning in the part of the room that was visible from the doorway ; they shed a faint light upon the carpet and the furniture.

Standing erect in this dying glimmer, a skull-cap of black silk on his head, his neck and shoulders swathed in a white shawl with a fringe, a pair of spectacles straddling the fleshy part of his nose, a silhouette, which could only be that of M. Hippolyte, was reading in an indistinct voice from a book which he was holding to his eyes, in order to see the text more clearly. By his side, leaning against the corner of the chimneypiece, entirely draped in a similar shawl, and wearing a silk hat on his head, M. Myrtil was following the lesson in his own book, his long body stooping forward. Other persons no less immobile were scattered in the gloom, and created by their intoning a murmur broken by groans. The men were seated or standing, capped with different forms of headgear, their faces bowed over their books, and their silk shawls folded over their shoulders ; women, in deep black, crouched over the arms of their chairs.

The boy's furtive entry had created no stir ; M. Le Pleynier had therefore all the time that he required to develop his amazement. But a whisper arose in a corner which he could not see. The toe of a shoe creaked on a plank in the floor, and a thing which resembled the face of Joseph Simler appeared gently before the eyes of the visitor.

The thing gazed at him mildly through its spectacles with a startled, distant expression ; the thing was of a pallor so livid as to give colour to the white fringed shawl that enwrapped it ; and the thing had its head buried in a bowler hat of the very kind which was being worn in the streets, at that time, by numbers of adult Frenchmen. M. Le Pleynier did not easily lose his presence of mind. Nevertheless he was able only to open his mouth and say : " Am I disturbing you ? "

Which earned him the incontinent judgment of a "double-dyed idiot" from his inner self. The thing parted its lips: "Excuse us, Sir. My nephew has made a stupid mistake. But to-day we are not *at home* upon any excuse . . ." Then, in an even lower tone: "It is our holy day—our annual fast—you understand . . . ?"

As if Le Pleynier understood!

"What on earth have I done?"

He stammered an apology, turned his back hurriedly, and walked away, trying to muffle his step. Two heads had been raised at the sound. He would have sworn that one of them crowned the normally most Christian shoulders of one Monsieur Victor Léon, a coffee-broker and ardent Orléanist. As for the other, it was merely a rubicund foreman who had migrated from Alsace, who had once been pointed out to him. Neither Hippolyte nor Myrtil had made the slightest gesture.

M. Le Pleynier reached the courtyard. Joseph followed on his heels breathing deeply. When they were in the daylight, the visitor turned round. Then a pair of dull eyes, hollow cheeks and sunken temples gave its full meaning to the word *fast*: "*Fichtre!* This seems a serious matter. The savages!" he thought to himself again. And he insisted that the other should accompany him no farther. As he shut the iron door behind him, he could see Joseph, swathed in his white silk shawl with blue stripes, watching him depart and touching his bowler hat again with a distracted air.

As soon as he had "regained his freedom," M. Le Pleynier quickened his pace. The clatter of the hundred thousand spindles of Vendeuvre seemed to have considerably decreased. On the other hand, the enigmatic silence of the "Nouveaux Etablissements Simler" weighed upon his shoulders as though it had been supporting all the fringed shawls of Israel.

Two blocks farther on, he ran into des Challeries and

Huillery. The former accosted him with vivacity : " Did you come by the Jews' factory ? Something must have gone wrong. They've stopped work."

" Anyway," the stout Huillery added, with a triumphant rage in his voice, " their last balance-sheet can't have been as wonderful as people make out. My information . . ."

" In six months they will have vacated the premises," des Challeries broke in, rubbing his shapely hands together.

" If they haven't before that," growled Huillery, suppressing the offensive word out of respect for the company in which he found himself. M. Le Pleynier leaned towards des Challeries and said to him, lowering his tone :

" You know my opinion about that. These are matters in which I have neither mental nor material interest,

" I grieve for you . . .
Not for myself, for I can flee, or hide."

He made the other turn round, pointed out to him the Simler roofs, visible above the monumental porch of Sabouret *fils*, and continued, dwelling with emphasis upon the opening beat, the cæsura and the rhyme of each line :

" But mark yon hand that travels to and fro :
A day will come, and come not slow,
When that small grain it sheds will be your ruin.
Breeding contrivances for your undoing,
Springs and snares to catch you in,
And many a noose and many a gin,
Till when the fatal day has risen
You'll all be dead, or clapt in prison.
Beware the cage, beware the pan."[1]

[1] As once before, I am indebted to my friend Mr. Edward Marsh, for permission to quote these lines from his version of La Fontaine's Fable.
C. K. S. M.

M. des Challeries settled his monocle in position : " Good heavens, my dear friend, you seem greatly agitated ! What about the time when you tried to force them upon us as members of the Club ? "

" I am no longer in business, thank God. I am restored to the status of a man. But if I were one of you . . ."

" What about it ? You see they have stopped work to-day. This is only the beginning of the end. I've even heard it said that they cleared out during the night. Within six months from now, Gabard, rash fellow that he is, and the bailiff Michonneau will be pasting up some interesting documents on their gate."

M. Le Pleynier, who had walked away from him, returned, his forefinger raised : " Cage or pan, des Challeries, cage or pan ! That is why I say :

" *And eat the seed while yet you can.*"

" It destroys itself, my dear sir ; without any need of all this agitation."

But M. Le Pleynier was walking away, his head in the air, repeating aloud :

" *Beware the cage, beware the pan,*"

and leaving the other two in doubt as to his sanity.

On the evening of this day, Laure's sharp eyes were the first to detect, high up in the sky, the tremulous apparition of the third star. Kitchen and parlour at once learned the tidings. The result was an immediate clamour. A door opened to reveal Sarah's joyful smile : " Supper is ready ! "

A smell of rich soup crept over the floor. It rose and gripped the members of the party by the shoulders. The folded *talesses* were already lying heaped upon the chimney-piece. M. Hippolyte was the first to appear ; he was followed

by Myrtil, his brow encircled with a crimson weal where his hat had pressed upon it.

The table and the room itself were too small. Appetites of twenty-four hours' standing brought the blood to their cheeks. A pink wine, sulphurous as a gunflint, a noble relic of Alsace, saved in the evacuation, sharpened the flavour of a boiled beef fit for the gods. The children let the scalding marrow run on to long slices of bread with salt butter. And when hunger had fired its last shot at the potatoes and lettuce, a dish of *gänsefleisch*, a terrine of Strasbourg *pâté*, thirty feet of sausage and a mountain of fritters trickling with grease came to remind the party that pleasure is as worthy of respect as necessity.

Great was the merriment at the expense of Victor Léon, speechless with astonishment at the thought of having kept another *Kippur*.

And the broker agreed that religion has its points, as he crunched morsels of *griebe* behind his moustaches. A drop of Vouvray succeeded in convincing him that the Eternal had granted the pardon implored throughout a night and a day. The children had vanished. The women drove the men into the parlour with their pipes and a priceless bottle of Kirsch from the Black Forest. The storm that had been threatening all day had passed away without breaking. Joseph and Guillaume exchanged a glance and stole from the room.

VII

They made their way to the office, and Joseph lighted the lamp. A modest allowance of alcohol, after a day of uninterrupted abstinence and reflection, made their minds keen and alert.

The mail had been waiting for twenty-four hours. They sat down at either side of the table and attacked it methodically.

It was the one day in the year on which, by a tradition already of long standing, this privilege was bestowed upon them.

" Bonnet," said Guillaume, " six pieces Loup de Mer."

" Sigaut-Legrand cancel the order they sent two days ago."

" What reason ? "

" No reason. ' Deeply regret.' "

" Ye-es ! Jalabert, of Dijon, four pieces blue serge."

" The *Bon Marché* . . . humph ! Absolutely nothing they require . . . useless for us to trouble . . . regrets."

" Must try them again."

" I intend to. If they think they're rid of us with a letter . . ."

" Verneuil Brothers, ten pieces *pékiné Gênéral Faidherbe*, on approval."

" On approval. We've got beyond the stage of approval."

Guillaume's uneasiness gives the answer to Joseph's ill humour.

" Will they stick to us ? "

" Yes, with all sorts of airs and graces. I know the fellows ; they've no life in them. After their junior clerk had been keeping his great coat for a month on their empty shelves, they would make me waste four trips on begging them to be so kind . . . "

" *Belle Jardinière*," Guillaume went on.

" Ah, *Belle J*——? "

" Gentlemen, humph . . . deeply regret . . . promise not to forget you . . . interesting samples . . ."

" What in hell ! I know : ' delay in negotiations, previous orders, long-standing relations with Elbeuf and Roubaix.' Well, Guillaume, you can write them off."

" The *Belle Jardinière* and the *Bon Marché*, both on the same day."

" A useful mail."

" Let us get on."

But Joseph has flung himself back in his chair :

" There are days when one would like to let the whole thing go hang."

The unfamiliar languor in his voice makes Guillaume prick up his nose.

" Like Benjamin? " he inquires, in a tone which he is unable to rid of its aggressive accent.

" Like Benjamin."

" You knew about it."

" He gave me to understand . . . the day we went in the brake."

This calm response comes as fresh fuel to Guillaume's nervous irritation, like a faggot of dry wood.

" Pure madness."

" Humph . . . ? "

" Jacob and Afroum are in a fine mess."

" Tut, their business is doing well."

" You are astounding. Grief counts for nothing with you ?"

Joseph buries himself in a sort of abstraction which might be considered affected. He adopts his most drawling tone : " Grief? Whose . . . grief? "

" To chuck up everything ; scribble a line from the post-office and get away on a steamer, like a thief. I should never have thought it of him."

Joseph lowers a vague gaze at his brother, through his spectacles : " All the same, he has done what he said he would do."

" Done . . . what ? "

" Tried his luck, given up what was becoming too easy, to start afresh . . ."

" And, if I am not mistaken, you do not altogether disapprove ? "

Joseph puts an excessive glibness in his reply : " I neither approve nor disapprove. Every man is . . . free."

But this speech, no sooner uttered, has brought Guillaume with a bound to the middle of the floor. " Free ? No one is free. Everyone has his task which he is bound to perform."

" Bound ? "

Without heeding the latent mockery, Guillaume paces the floor, with a short, quick step : " As though it were easy to live when we *know* what we have to do. He has run away. I call that cowardice. We have no right, Chosef, no right. There are certain things which we do not leave behind us, like an empty barrel ; the business to which we have pledged ourselves and which bears our name, our parents, wife, children. We are all bound up with what we have done, and to-day is bound up with yesterday, and to-morrow, and so on, like . . . like the links in a chain. He thought he was setting himself free. He will live and learn. . . . And that was forbidden him, to him more than to anyone."

" Why ? " Joseph inquires in an abysmal voice. The fanatic comes to a halt, plants himself in front of him, and raises his Minor Prophet's voice : " Because he was a Frenchman, Chosef, and he had the *good fortune* to fight for his country. That is what ought to have held him back more than anything."

To this awakening of the memory which gnaws each of them alike, Joseph replies feebly : " He had paid his debt."

" One does not pay. One never pays. One merely increases the debt."

" But Lambert ! "

" By letting himself be killed, Lambert made Benjamin all the more French, not any less."

An idea occurs to him, he suddenly lowers his tone :

" As a matter of fact, you may well ask yourself why . . . at Gravelotte . . . one was taken, and not the other ? "

Joseph leans forward with a concentrated stare : " He was asking himself that very question, Guillaume. Isn't that extraordinary ? "

But already Guillaume has relapsed to the level of his everyday cares, if not slightly below it : " Hermine was upset by his visit, the other day, because of the effect it might have on Justin, you follow me ? From that point of view, we may feel a certain relief."

It is now Joseph's turn to feel the tempest of rage beating up within him : " Ugh ! We've talked enough. To work."

He returns to his task, with a cold fury which astonishes Guillaume : " Bazin, five pieces . . . We weren't asking him for charity . . . A man who offers us yarn . . . Another who wants to sell us oil. His prices are not extravagant ; we might consider him. . . . The Clothweavers' Friendly Society. That's pretty good ! They don't think us good enough to touch with a pair of tongs, but they would like to have our quotations. . . . And who is this ? Wilhelm ! Wilhelm ! Wilhelm ! Delmotte . . ."

" What, Delmotte ? Tell me ! "

" Delmotte, an order for ninety pieces, including sixty of *pékiné* Châteaudun at seventeen fifty."

" *Donnerwetter !* Ninet . . ."

" One of Lorilleux-Pommier's customers ! "

" Had you called upon him ? "

" Not a word. I sent them my samples with my card, by a commissionaire, six weeks ago."

" That's the stuff, we're *getting* them."

" It's only a beginning . . . Wait six months, and you shall see."

While Joseph is rubbing his hands and performing other gestures of the sort, Guillaume is hurriedly opening the remaining letters.

" Eleven more pieces, in three orders : Mathias of Tours, Haas of Limoges, and a man at Saint Denis ; and two refusals, one from le Havre . . . the other from old Carimand."

" Good *Kippur*, Guillaume ! "

Joseph is on his feet, his spectacles beaming, and holds out his hands to his brother. Guillaume grips them awkwardly.

" Good *Kippur*, Jos ! "

But they might have told each other that, with the exception of Joseph's one afternoon in May, none of the family has known what it is to take an hour off for his own relaxation ; the gate has never been opened, in the morning, save by the hands of Guillaume ; the pay has never passed through any hands but Hippolyte's ; Myrtil has taken in his fingers and put to his nose a specimen of every bale of wool ; no customer has received a call from anyone but Joseph.

" They're sharp for profit ; add it to their pile and leave it there. Regular *Pruscos*," growls Pailloux, with a grudging respect for these hard-working men.

" The *Bon Marché* and the *Belle Jardinière*, you'll get them, like the rest, and the *Louvre* thrown in ! " says Joseph. The envelopes with their printed headings fly lightly about the room. The brothers leave it. A sound of voices comes from the dining-room to which the smokers have returned, from a preference for the round table and a desire to economise in light. The full moon illuminates before the brothers the architecture of their factory.

" Do you remember ? " Joseph murmurs, almost unconsciously. There is nothing glorious about this little factory. But every stone of it is alive. Joseph amused himself with the calculation, during one of those too inactive days at the start : capital, interest, machinery, looms, cost of transport and installation—each stone and each brick works out at eighty-two centimetres of cloth, cleaned and pressed.

" It is not paid for yet," replies Guillaume. A sigh expands Joseph's breast like the bellows of a forge. He lays his hand with a fatherly gesture upon his excitable brother's arm : " It is paying for itself every day. Lorilleux-Pommier, by keeping up their 1802 scale of prices, are paying us for

it." Then, in a lower tone : " All the same, what a cursed winter ! Do you remember ? When nothing was coming in, no orders, no work. All those scoundrels who had taken advantage of the war to step into our shoes. And the customers who answered us : ' Acquired fresh standards, show us what you're worth.' "

As if Guillaume does not remember ! He gnaws his moustache and attempts a sickly smile : " What a plunge that was, buying the factory."

But his smile is drowned by the surge of hateful memories. With a shudder he presses his arms against his chest upon which there reposed, for two days and a night, the stipulations of the informal agreement.

That madman Joseph has already darted off. He is pacing the night in long strides ; there he is melting into the shadow of the low wall ; he can be heard counting : " Seventy-nine . . . eighty . . . this wall is never eighty metres . . ."

A burst of laughter freezes Guillaume's blood. He, poor fellow, is unable to live the past over again. These fourteen months have definitely fixed his character.

While Joseph is on his way back to him, he is drawing up the budget of their life. He has calculated it so often that the account is soon balanced. Of the 210,000 francs which the factory cost, to which must be added 10,500 francs of interest for the first year, 22,000 have already been repaid, two months in advance, by a cheque dated July 31. The cost of the looms and of installation is covered without difficulty by increasing monthly instalments.

But the notary of the German Emperor and King of Prussia is in no hurry to sell the building at Buschendorf. The grass is sprouting. The windowpanes have become irresistible targets for the projectiles of boyhood. A gale of wind has blown down half the chimneys. The wooden gate has fallen ; two letters have reported this damage. Therefore : 60,000 francs to be deducted temporarily from the assets.

A *Rechtsanwalt* has installed himself in the old home. He has been most obliging ; he has valued it at 20,000. But the Simlers have long ceased to feel any surprise at this ; for he sedulously forgets to pay, and the imperial notary refrains from pressing him.

Of the 5,000 due from various debtors, 700 have been paid ; the rest must, it seems, be placed under the heading *War Risks*, which are not covered by insurance.

The 8,000 francs for stock in trade have declined to 5,000. The removal worked out at not less than 8,000.

And if ten months of unceasing toil have already reduced to 230,000 the 260,000 francs of debt (buildings and material) which the initiative of the young Simlers contracted in the West, on the credit side there is nothing to be shown but 75,000 if the *Rechtsanwalt* pays, or 55,000 if he proves a defaulter.

Now, to keep eight people alive upon an uncertain income of 17,000 francs, without a cent in reserve . . .

" What are you thinking about, Wilhelm ? "

Joseph has been standing there for some time, his legs apart, gazing at his elder brother. The moonlight accentuates the worn aspect of that delicate profile. And when Joseph has followed his brother to the warping-shed bathed in a blue radiance, the sight of the line of buildings over which Guillaume reigns inspires the same thought in them both : " We shall still need plenty of Delmotte's orders, to pay for everything, to provide all our supplies . . ."

The machines stand there in a row with the tranquillity of creditors, gluttonous and gorged. They do indeed embody a privileged debt, the debt to labour. It is now ten o'clock at night ; in eight hours more, the siren of the Simler works will raise its voice to summon six score workers to their toil. Be the work scanty or abundant, its summons will be equally imperious. No one will be able to detect in it the tremor that reveals false courage.

No

How many mails to be opened and stock-takings to be made, before these partial victories become the decisive victory ! Until then, a life of bondage to the machine, yarn, labour, the stone of the walls, and the balance-sheet re-drafted, a hundred times in a week, by shrewd calculating brains.

Joseph examines the warping-machine of whose slowness Guillaume has complained.

" Who sold it to us ? "

" It was bought when we moved in, from Huillery. It has done forty years' service. The wheels won't go round."

" Hm ! A machine would come to . . . ? "

" Three thousand five hundred."

" Three, five ? Ha." (A pause.) " The saving in labour would balance the cost of purchase, surely ? "

For the last month Guillaume has been brooding over the figures. " There can be no possible doubt of it, Joseph."

A silence big with meaning. Finally, it is broken by Joseph :

" Has any of them got one ? "

" No, there's only old lumber like this, at Vendeuvre."

Joseph's large head rises with a jerk : " In that case, buy."

But Guillaume still has something on his mind : " Verviers offers warping-machines at three, five . . . we might find one at Mulhouse . . . for two, six . . . a less recent model."

" Take my advice, don't utter a word before Papa and Myrtil. We must have the machine. Buy the model at three, five."

Guillaume heaves a sigh and passes his hand over his face. He was quite certain of Joseph's support. But now his warping-machine is secured. He grips his brother's arm.

" You shall see, Joseph, you shall see ! "

And, with a stifled squeal : " It is my share in Delmotte's order ! "

The balance sheet of a moment ago is clean forgotten. Their business blood is hammering against their temples. And the moonlight is fortunately insufficient to reveal the alternate flush and pallor of a thin man with the profile of a Persian king.

" Shall we take a little turn ? " says Joseph. As they pass the iron door, Joseph feels a burning little hand slipped into his own, and Tintin raises a pair of imploring eyes towards him.

" Mamma said I might. It was so hot up there ! "

The walls breathe upon their cheeks a dark, brick-kiln swelter. They pass between the double hedge of their competitors. They proceed along the interminable front of the Lorilleux-Pommier weaving-mill, whose six chimneys raise their crowned heads above an unmoving bank of foliage. A feeling of satisfaction flows through their veins.

" Well ? " comes at length from Joseph. Guillaume smiles, and suddenly draws closer to his brother.

" Joseph, listen. Ahem . . ."

As he seems reluctant to continue, Joseph is obliged to supply a little momentum : " Ahem ? Get on with it ! "

" The Sterns . . . the Sterns have behaved really well."

" No complaint to make," Joseph replies cautiously.

" We . . . one . . . they have the right . . ."

" To all our gratitude."

" To all our friendship, Joseph."

" They have."

" Good. Then I can ask you, in confidence : what do you think of Elisa ? "

Tintin feels a quiver pass through the hand that is grasping his own.

" No fault to find with her, in the matter of gratitude and respect, Guillaume."

" Yes, yes," his elder brother hastens to reply. " But in another connection, Joseph ? "

" Oh well, she's a big girl, and I wish her every happiness, Guillaume ; will that do ? "

" Is that all you feel ? "

" I suppose Cousin Mina has been raising hell over Benjamin's going. She had them as good as married already."

" Yes, but Benjamin has gone. It is a question of deciding who is to be Elisa's husband, and . . ."

" That leaves me quite unmoved," Joseph interrupts him in a calm tone. " But if everyone else feels as I do, she runs a great risk of dying an old maid."

Guillaume feels discouraged ; he knits his brows and quickens his pace. They no longer feel any desire to go on walking. Tintin holds his breath. He thrusts his hand anxiously into the hollow of his uncle's, as though this contact were a secret confidence.

And yet they advance until they see, at the end of a street, the first lamps of the Place d'Armes. Then they change their course and turn homewards, without a word.

A hundred yards from the factory, a couple meet them.

" We've just come away from your place. These manufacturers deny themselves nothing. They're not satisfied with our old *Kippur* coffee and milk ! " cries Uncle Wilhelm with a forced gaiety.

Aunt Babette's black shawl is drawn tightly over her bosom. Her nephews fail to appease her humour. She has declined, for herself and her husband, the invitation to share the soup and goose. Her silvery voice confines itself to the words : " Good night, good night ! "

And off she goes, taking her old chatterbox with her.

Guillaume bows his head with a worried air. Joseph is now walking four paces ahead ; he is muttering to himself. Tintin hears him say, with a nervous shrug of his shoulders :

" Bah ! After all . . ."

The fact is that the Simlers agreed, a fortnight ago, to let the Sterns have their output in the summer of '73 at a special

price. Blum knew this ; Blum has been waiting for the same offer to be made to himself ; Blum considers that the state of his own affairs entitles him to this token of affection ; Blum is still waiting ; he will have a long time to wait.

His nephews reach the gate. They bring back with them several damaged articles : Guillaume, his diplomacy, Joseph, his blind faith in the necessity of a strict industrial policy, Tintin—it would be hard to say. And Joseph's flute may continue, for the next hour, to wail the most lonely and desolate of its airs, but all in vain.

VIII

" You know, that stout Monsieur Simler with spectacles, who called here last spring ? " said M. Le Pleynier.

" Yes ? " came—in a tone that implied " no "—from his daughter, who knew perfectly well to whom her father was referring.

" You don't remember him ? " M. Le Pleynier insisted ; " that worthy Alsatian, in that incredible brown jacket, who stayed for an hour boring me with some story about the Club, and aimed at nothing less than teaching us all how to live by making a little cloth at old Poncet's place ? "

As a general rule, if you are famed for your refinement, erudition, or wit, you may be quite certain that this quality, whichever it be, will invariably make your children lose their tempers, and will create a permanent cause of discord between them and yourself.

M. Le Pleynier had well earned his reputation for enveloping his subtlety in sententious, eloquent periphrases. Mlle. Le Pleynier might have become philosophically resigned to these. But we must make allowances for a temperament in the composition of which gunpowder and other explosives occupied an undue place.

" Yes ? What then ? Assuming that I do remember the young man. What then ? "

" It is not possible that with your discerning eye . . ."

" Oh, you'll make me die."

" You are astonishing. It amounts almost to divination. All the world . . ."

" What has all the world got to do with me ? I leave the world alone, and they will kindly leave me alone."

" Very good, my child. Do not be vexed with me, I beg of you," the old man replied, expelling from his meerschaum pipe clouds of smoke that were undeniably angry. A silence followed during which Hélène Le Pleynier finished mixing a dish of bread, gravy and milk for her cat, " my old-maid's cat," as this Power of two-and-twenty summers used to call it.

But M. Le Pleynier had not an ounce of bitterness in his nature, and as for Mlle. Le Pleynier, life was the only thing that mattered to her. He raised his coffee-cup to his clean-shaven lips :

" It was the day when that rascal Brichet came to put a plaster on Turc."

" That animal : I have never heard anyone talk so much nonsense about animals," replied Hélène.

" It is quite true " her father said, laughing, " it is quite true that Turc would have been better qualified to give advice to Brichet than Brichet to Turc."

" Advice and plaster."

She rose, set the dish down on the hearthstone, and as she left it there, wiping her hand on her blue apron, M. Le Pleynier shot an incisive glance in her direction, and told himself once again that there was no fault to be found with the perfect harmony of his daughter,—with the sole exception that it was his daughter's, and that, for that reason, he felt it to be his duty not to enjoy it in silence.

" If he could bring himself to refrain from either flattering or educating me, he would be the most tolerable of fathers,"

his daughter used to say. But an evil spirit would whisper in the good man's ear the very words of praise which a daughter cannot tolerate from her father, or the most inopportune of moral maxims. He was clever enough, but his cleverness was of no use whatsoever in domestic transactions. And so he contented himself with bowing his shoulders to the tempests that he provoked, without ever understanding, but without ceasing to admire. For his daughter's superiority was the one dogma which he would never have allowed himself to discuss, while he continued to treat her as a child, as befits a father and a man of experience.

He joined her in the garden through which, already equipped with a walking-stick, shawl and straw hat, she was making her way, book in hand, towards her favourite retreat beneath the pines.

" As I was saying to you, my child, I met that stout Simler in brown with spectacles, who paid us a visit on the day when that poor Brichet had called to doctor Turc. Honestly, you can't place him ? "

Mlle. Le Pleynier stopped, in some uneasiness. Her father was too little interested in anything to keep to any topic of conversation or to any person in the world, save herself and himself. But he was pigheaded, and capable, by way of amusing himself, of the most flagrant interference with the liberty of the subject. He continued, as it happened, to dwell upon the topic with a splendid ponderosity :

" You don't recollect, either, the day when we were coming home in the dogcart by the l'Épine road, and came upon him and all his tribe, overturned in the ditch opposite the keeper's house ? "

" It wasn't opposite the keeper's house, it was within a hundred yards of the Fontaine de la Plate," thought Mlle. Le Pleynier ; " what is he driving at ? "

She felt herself filled with apprehension for herself and for her day, that precious day which was like every other.

" Well, anyhow, I ran across him last week, and told him that it would be a pleasure to us both if he would come and see us one Sunday."

A warm flush suffused Mlle. Le Pleynier's face.

" What in the world possesses you, to make you mix me up in all your calls and invitations ? Haven't I begged you a hundred times not to force me to make fresh acquaintances ? I have not the slightest interest in this young man and he has not the slightest need to see me again. It is quite sufficient that I appear to have met him once already. You're always landing me in some trouble or other."

" But, my dearest girl, I really fail to see what trouble it can cause you if I invite one of those worthy young Alsatians to my house. It is of no consequence."

" Everything is of consequence. You know quite well that it is not to your house that you are inviting him, but to mine, since you have been so clever as to drag my name into it. Besides, if I fail for a moment to put in an appearance at this historic interview, I should not, perhaps, have to listen to you reproaching me for the next month, and calling me all the names under the sun."

M. Le Pleynier made the hopeless gesture of a man who feels that his reason has deserted him : " If I had supposed for a moment that I should arouse such a hue-and-cry . . ."

Hélène returned with a firm step to the house, where she laid aside her straw hat, her stick and her shawl. Her father stood for a while, crestfallen, before the border in which his rose-trees were preparing their last display of blossom, muttered a few quite meaningless expressions and finally retired to his study, where he invoked sleep to soothe his remorse.

He had not for a moment lost sight of the fact that to bring Joseph Simler to the house would cause his daughter serious annoyance. She had explained to him, a hundred times over her reasons for withdrawing from society, and a hundred times over he had agreed that she was right. He

had himself no other reason for what he had done than the accident of his meeting with Joseph and a secret predilection. But he had, until the last moment, soothed his conscience with pretexts in which he did not believe. The scene was enacted afresh every time. For all his respect for his daughter never prevented him from doing what he chose in the end.

And so, while the rumble of his pacified spirit shook a whole storey of the house, on the floor above his daughter was getting rid of her anger in interminable feats of pianistic velocity.

If Mendelssohn suffered thereby, the fault must be imputed perhaps to that obliging genius himself. He has the fate that he deserves. He serves as initiator, and we attribute to others the knowledge that we owe to him ; when the storm breaks, he is to be found in his place, to dispel the vapours and profit by opportunities.

When she considered that the vapours were sufficiently dispelled, Mlle. Le Pleynier shut her piano, but not with a bang, for she treated that Father of Joys with respect, and sat down at her desk.

In a square, vigorous hand which traced the outline of each letter with the unexpected, decisive stroke of a Japanese painter, at the same time marking the paper with the force of Callot's needle, she wrote, without raising her head from the table, the letter that follows :

DARLING,

The dear good man is taking his nap, in his study, one of those light snoozes with both eyes and both ears which you know so well, and you would never guess, if you could hear how he is snoring, the trick the cunning old wretch has just played upon me.

If he hasn't gone and found a new diversion in an unfortunate family of Alsatians driven from their home by the war, who have set up a sort of dead-alive little weaving-plant at Vendeuvre ! He met them, as he never fails to meet any oddity that

may be wandering over the earth's surface, and he has naturally constituted himself their protector.

All this would have mattered no more than anything else that he does, had he not made up his mind to introduce them—each of them in turn, I dare say—to me.

I can quite understand his becoming bored, poor man, with no society but my own, and yours for a month or two now and again. But you know all the efforts I have made to get him to consent to amuse himself. I have succeeded in ridding him of almost all his scruples as to leaving me alone in the house. With his club, his shooting, his griffons, his four tenants to argue with him, and, last year, his famous parliamentary candidature, and his newspaper after dinner and his *Dictionnaire Philosophique* after supper, and those *Souvenirs du Coup d'Etat* which he is compiling and does not fail to read to me for my sins, and I listening to them as though they were the *Revelation*, all this manages to pass a few hours. But God alone—and women—know what a genius men have for not finding anything to do, and remaining on our hands like lead. The sheer laziness of mind and body in which most of the men whom I have met spend their lives is a thing that always astounds me. A woman, at that rate, would waste away. The silliest geese among us take ten times more trouble, since the mere organic conditions of our life involve us, as a rule, in suffering which the lord of creation would not endure for an instant.

I must however be fair. My father is the only more or less live man that I have ever met. I am fully conscious of his merits. Which, incidentally, accounts for his getting so upon my nerves. For we have frequently observed, you and I, that when a girl takes to admiring her father, it is imperative that she should not be able to endure him, otherwise they both become too ridiculous and intolerable. Now you can say whether my father is not a man worthy of all respect. If I had been of my

mother's generation, and had met him, I would no more have hesitated to marry him than she did. But, good heavens, how bored I should have been ! It is true that, with a nature like mine, I shall die an old maid. And that will be a perpetual proof of what fools men are. For you alone are not unaware, my dear and great friend, that I am the most easy-going woman in the world.

If men only knew how little we are prepared to demand of them ! Honesty, generosity ! What woman would not be satisfied with such a jointure ?

But no. The devil will have his due. They think to win us only by their physical attractions, and (the cleverer among them) their intellect.

Intellect, to be sure,—the minimum necessary for everyday life. That is not enough for us, we must have the Whole, the Whole alone seems to be worthy of our interest. I mean by this that great male intellect, creative and fertilising, which must exist somewhere, since the world continues to go on, but which I have never met. As for what *they* call by that name, their schoolbook patter, their supposedly clever conversation, which goes with good breeding as their neckties go with their white shirtfronts, their tinsel wit, what use can we make of these to live ?

We are left, therefore, with physical attraction. I can hear you laugh from where I am sitting, you who have been married in the fullest sense of the word. And you might hear me laughing merrily in return, since even in the maiden state we have certain intuition, a power of divination—since even a little girl of three *knows* quite well.

Who will get the idea out of their heads that when they appear in our presence there can be any question of their being or making themselves desirable, in the sense in which they doubtless understand the word ? I believe that this is really at the root of all the trouble. As they judge us in the light of desire, they suppose that we judge them accordingly.

That some of them may be repulsive, and others extremely appetising, there is no use in denying. But to say that, to a healthy-minded woman, this feeling has the slightest connection with desire—you know better than I what to think of that. It is desire that, one day or another, may give birth to physical attraction. But with what careful attentions, I presume, that birth must be watched and tended if it is not to end in immediate death?

Tell me, my dear good friend, you with whom I have never put any restraint upon my thought or language, tell me if I am wrong in my suspicion that, by his failure to use those attentions, man is reduced nine times out of ten, to making the best of a woman's weakness and consent? And does he not then assure himself, out of sheer vanity, that he is tasting the fruits of a crop which has never sprouted from the soil? Ah, Renée de l'Estorade, wisdom never sufficiently studied!

But doubtless this mutual deceit is in accordance with the secret ways of nature, and it is because I have failed to practise it that I find myself compelled to withdraw from the world, with my twenty-two birthdays, my "Wingless Victory" figure, and that pythian brain with which you tease me. I cannot explain to myself, save by their disgust at not finding me a blindfold partner in the charming game which they have invented, why every man who has crossed my path should have turned his back on me, shocked or mystified.

My feminine pride, however, cannot bear not to admit that there have been a few who have left me captivated by my charm. But really their insignificance made them resemble those vices for which there is no excuse. Their sentiments succeeded only in making them slightly less supportable. You who have seen practically all the men whom I have met in the last five years, must agree with me that not a single one of them has ever been in the least degree attractive.

I shall marry or I shall not, according as destiny

may have decreed. But if my fate does intervene, it will manage everything by itself, without any human assistance, least of all my father's. For he is terrible. I can hear him as I write, going about everywhere repeating, with that inimitable air which we know so well : " Yes, my daughter is a superior person." But when he's calling upon his grain merchant, or upon the Prefect, he never fails to ask them, between his bowings and scrapings, if they haven't got a husband somewhere for me.

Does not all this help to justify my fury when he informed me just now, innocently, that he had included me in his invitation to one of those young Alsatians I told you about ?

I have no longer a mother who would enable me to hold my tongue and pass unnoticed. I am obliged to be there and to open fire, like the Guards. What is more, my natural warmth always gets the better of me and carries me beyond the limits of prudence. You have seen me a hundred times giving battle !

And so it was not for want of assuring him that I did not wish to meet or know anyone in the world, this man no more than any other. And indeed this man less than any other.

For I have met him already, this young man. First of all, here ; he came to thank my father over something or other in which the people of Vendeuvre had once again shown the meanness of their natures. After which I passed him on the road, with his family.

Was it the man from the East, with his character and features? Or was it the Israelite (I had never met one before) ? Or was it not after all simply the individual, and a sort of personality, I dare not say superiority, diffused through him, that forced me to notice him ?

The fact remains that this young man, who is neither handsome nor what could be called seductive, but thoroughly clean and simple, seemed to me to be of a different species. A sort of confidence

in himself, and abundant but controlled strength, pride marred by contempt for other people—youth, a fresh life, quite new, active, curious and gay, life in short—a creature made to understand, to understand at once and accurately the meaning, with the roots and radiations of one's intentions, and no doubt, to anticipate, in a little while, and guess them. Otherwise, a formlessness, a want of culture that are stupefying. A regular child-man, in contrast to the men-children who surround us.

And yet, in him, a unique and unexpected element, by which I cannot help being repelled, and for which I can find no comparison, except an almost horrible image—that strange, quick, mechanical intelligence that we observe in an ant, do you follow me? With that metallic certainty which seems to us pitiless, because there is nothing in common between their motives and ours.

But perhaps this is an impression that every man gives who is at all original.

However that may be, even when he is reduced to his exact proportions, this young man, you know as well as I, can have no place in my life. I cannot consent to allow anything to enter it which will destroy the organisation and balance that I have succeeded in giving to it. Nothing will penetrate it henceforward that is not inevitable. Neither an inquisitive stranger, nor anyone else. It is—since two events which I need not recall to you—my last possession. Even if I am to grow old alone, there are enough interests in this world to furnish my existence from cellar to attic. So long as there remains a picture that I have not seen, a symphony or a quartet that . . .

But the Power that disposes of our actions has determined to spare me nothing. A moment ago the bell at the outer gate rang. Here he is coming up the path. I can watch him approaching from my window. What act of folly have I allowed my father to commit?

Thank heaven, he is not alone—he is leading a

dark little boy by the hand—is he married, then ?—has he got a son ?—There is a justice in injustice after all. I shall confine myself to the child.

Can you decipher the hieroglyphics of these last lines ? He is crossing the threshold. I must tear myself from you.

Ah, my good friend, my dear old friend, why are you not here to bring to the most barren of lives the support of your judicious, silent presence ?

The faithful Hilaire was already tapping at her door. Hélène recognised once again, in this zeal, the exclusive attachment of his servants to M. Le Pleynier, and a trace of affectation in making themselves his messengers.

IX

" I HAVE TAKEN THE LIBERTY OF BRINGING MY YOUNG NEPHEW to see you," Joseph's unembarrassed voice sounded from the drawing-room on the ground floor.

" Undoubtedly I am mad ; *could* that little dark curly-headed boy be his son ? " Hélène asked herself as she heard him, from the landing above.

" You were quite right, my daughter adores children," M. Le Pleynier replied.

" They have wakened him from his nap ; he is furious," thought Hélène, hearing the nasal, contemptuous tone that her father's voice had assumed. And it would be untrue to pretend that she did not feel a certain satisfaction.

She entered the room. Joseph held out his hand to her, while his eyes sparkled cordially behind his spectacles.

" A bold beginning ! In a minute, he'll be knocking me down ! " and she gave the Alsatian's hand a firm clasp.

M. Le Pleynier had definite ideas about the kissing of hands ; he turned his head away muttering : " English habits, I suppose " ; and Hilaire, who showed his face inopportunely at the door, received an order the urgency of which

was not apparent to him either at the moment or afterwards.

Joseph was prepared to be subjected to the mocking attention of a pair of large violet eyes. He was quite disarmed by receiving from them a greeting that was slightly bored and full of commiseration. Hélène's grave, controlled voice bade him good day, her hand had given a virile response to his abrupt overture. He was left feeling a trifle ashamed of himself.

" My young nephew, Justin Simler, Mademoiselle, I have ventured to bring him with me. He is my companion on my walks."

Hélène was already making for the child, who stood stiffly in his Sunday clothes, an absurd little round hat clenched in his fist, his hands encased in gloves of champagne-coloured floss silk, matching his socks. As he watched her approach he hardened his face, in which, separated by a too long nose, a pair of fine dark eyes were filled with a fierce defiance.

" Oho, this is a little chap who does not like women," thought Hélène, as Justin timidly and disdainfully drew back after she had taken his fingers in hers.

" We sent him to the lycée, when term began. *Naturally*, he went to the top of his class at once," said Joseph, gazing proudly at his nephew. The child did not move a muscle.

" A little boy ought not to listen so coolly to flattery of that sort," was Hélène's further impression. M. Le Pleynier scanned the boy with a peremptory glare which confirmed his daughter's judgment. But, as woman combines the elements necessary to criticism and to affection, Tintin found himself taken in hand, relieved of his outdoor garments, seated, and installed before a collection of the *Magasin Pittoresque*, before he knew what was happening to him, and without abandoning his airs and graces.

It was a fact that Justin had risen to the top of his class with a bound, as though by instinct, and that he regarded

this triumph, the reward of a passionate self-esteem, but won without any great effort, as the recognition due to his merits.

As for Joseph, the first word that Hélène uttered had struck him full in the face, and from that moment he floundered through a morass of deceptively familiar memories : " When have I been before, with these same people, at the same time of day, in this same situation ? Tintin was *already* perched on those cushions, *she* was *already* smoothing down the pages of the book with the tips of her fingers, and the old gentleman was *already* asking me . . ."

" Well, Monsieur Simler, have your prophecies been fulfilled ? "

" It's the same, appallingly the same," Joseph told himself, making superhuman efforts to escape from the hallucination. He flushed crimson, his ears began to twitch, this being his habitual reaction to the slightest emotion. Tintin was watching him covertly with surprise. Hélène intercepted an imploring glance and replied to it with so directly indulgent a smile from her handsome mocking eyes that the Alsatian found himself plunging, thirty fathoms deep, into the most luminous of aquariums.

" *She* looked at me in just that way, while I was thinking the very same thing, that other time. . . ."

Meanwhile he was perspiring with the effort to reply to M. Le Pleynier.

" Not too bad ; it all fits in, you know . . . even the style of hair . . . ahem, the millinery . . . I mean to say, the retail trade."

He was hypnotised by the other's whiskers. He stopped short, literally streaming.

" What nonsense is this he's telling me ? Can he be drunk ? " M. Le Pleynier asked himself as he scrutinised him.

" Spectacles don't always make a person look silly," thought Hélène. She smiled faintly, and focused her

attention upon the *Magasin Pittoresque*, in which Justin was discovering a far larger and more varied universe than he had hitherto supposed to exist.

" What the devil ! " Joseph could not help muttering. This false identity was still floating treacherously on the surface. But he felt that the illusion would soon be dispelled. The sound of voices drew nearer. He was tempted to regret it. These phantom surroundings released him, or so he felt, from the exaggerated formalism of the real world.

In a minute or two, he found himself in a fit state to show a bold front to the questions with which the " old gentleman " was assailing him.

" The industrial crisis ? " So there was a crisis ? To tell the truth, he, Joseph Simler, had heard it mentioned often enough in the course of his canvassing of customers. He had heard a confused sound of complaints round about him. But they themselves paid no attention, being at work from morning to night, and meeting literally nobody at Vendeuvre.

" Which proves that you have every cause for satisfaction with the state of your own business."

If he answered yes, it would not be true, and yet, without any thought of subterfuge, it would be wrong to say no.

" Still, the crushing burden of the new taxes . . ."

" Undoubtedly, but by working hard . . ."

" The decline of the purchasing power of the masses . . ."

" Yes, possibly. But there is always a demand for cloth, after all. And when one is turning out tolerably good stuff, at a price that is not too high . . ."

" You are fortunate. It is not everybody who can say the same," M. Le Pleynier replied from the depths of his armchair, drawing several mouthfuls of smoke in succession from his pipe and raising his head with an air of annoyance.

" You think so ? " said Joseph, with a malicious dilation of his eyes.

" He is *decidedly* charming," thought Hélène, as she watched them from where she was sitting ; " and not too ant-like after all ; only a little."

The pictures of the vast world, softly engraved in copper-plate, or subjected to the romantic treatment of the wood-block, were passing meanwhile before the eyes of Tintin. He became more human, and ventured at times upon a question. Then the tip of a long sunburned finger turned back in search of the picture, and, in a tone of confidence, a warm, grave, controlled voice told him of astonishing sorceries. The finger, the voice, this atmosphere of liberty in a sphere of interests into which he had never penetrated, the discreet attentions of the young lady, the absurd and nevertheless imposing manners of the Old Gentleman seemed to him to be so many disloyal counterfeits. And why was Uncle Joseph's face so red ?

The choice that a child of ten makes among different representations of the world is undoubtedly the most instructive of all lessons. Hélène did not hesitate to make use of it. The prints of battles, Alphonse de Neuville's battle-pieces, or pictures of bridges, railway stations and steamboats were the only ones that found favour in Justin's sight.

" You like that one ? " Mlle. Le Pleynier would ask as she saw him bend over it.

" And this one ? " she would then insinuate treacherously as she paused at the next page, upon which there might be a Delacroix, a Velasquez or a Titian. The child made a grimace and passed on. And yet a grotesque figure made him laugh, and the head of Leonardo, the great, white-bearded head of the Father of Magicians, held his attention for a moment, but only as a joke.

" The war generation, a barren harvest," thought Hélène, with the reflection that it was among this generation that she would end her days. As he had said twice : " At my lycée," she realised that this was the way of approach to the

real Justin Simler. They set out along it, the boy taking the lead without hesitation. His young masculine arrogance made her feel at once the importance that she must attach to such a guide. An inimitable look of superiority fell from his altitude upon the girl's humility. This storehouse of three weeks' experience condescended thus to reveal a certain tale of mutiny against a drawing-master, and the odious tyranny practised upon a score of youthful liberties by a fat, squinting, stammering usher ; he mingled with these information concerning tricks whose object was to filch from the housekeeper the dusters used for cleaning the blackboard, the comparative merit of the cream buns sold by the porters of the Petit and Grand Lycées, and the history of a composition which a Veteran had cribbed from a New Boy, who had basely sneaked to the Authorities ; one could not be quite certain whether the New Boy (denounced, brought before a court-martial, condemned and sent to Coventry) had not acted precisely as would have acted, in his place, a little fellow in Sunday clothes, whose skinny calves emerged from socks of yellow floss silk, with a pair of feverish eyes divided by a nose that was slightly too big. But Hélène did not allow this person to utter more than the minimum of nonsense which it is not always possible to check in time, and came away from this conversation considerably edified.

The conversation between the Old Gentleman and Uncle Joseph was not flagging meanwhile. Mlle. Le Pleynier, who seemed to possess more than one pair of eyes and ears, lost none of it. She was greatly amused in following the meanderings along which her father's caprice, curiosity, insolence and laziness were leading Joseph. She held herself in readiness to count him out. Impartial justice obliged her to admit that the Alsatian was managing to avoid, skilfully and openly, the most ingeniously laid traps.

"He has found his match," she concluded finally,

without guessing whence she derived a certain feeling of satisfaction, which, however, she did not allow to appear.

The young man got wind of something. He kept turning his face in Hélène's direction. She was not long in noticing that he did this more readily whenever he had reason to be not unduly dissatisfied with something that he had just said. He encountered however nothing but the impressive curve of a domed head, sloping down to the most mysterious of necks, and of superb waves of ashen hair, bordered by the pearly strand of a forehead. When on one occasion she was so incautious as to raise her eyes from the *Magasin Pittoresque*, he flushed so violently that she vowed that she would not let herself be caught again. And it was at this moment that she began to take notice, without deriving any pleasure from them, of various things.

M. Le Pleynier meanwhile was pursuing the satisfaction of his designs with the encyclopædic politeness of Rica and Usbek. He came at length to the second of his objects : having tried to make Joseph discuss the affairs of the Simler family, he attacked him upon "Jewish ceremonies."

"Tell me, now, Monsieur Simler," he began, watching the other with his little pig's eyes, "what is that fast that you were celebrating, on the day when I so unfortunately broke in and disturbed you ?"

"To tell the truth, it *is* a curious way of spending a day," said Joseph without any false modesty.

"To what does it correspond ?"

"Twenty-four hours free from any distraction, which we spend in self-denial and in prayer—you understand, I am not very well up in these matters, but it is supposed to deliver us from our sins," the Alsatian replied with a smile.

"You believe in it ?"

"It has always been done."

"You fast, literally."

"Heavens, yes."

M. Le Pleynier remembered the waxen cheeks and eyelids of the stalwart young man who was now uttering these words.

" Quite so," he growled. He went on : " You believe in miracles then, Monsieur Simler ? "

" Not for a moment."

" In that case . . . ? "

" What do you suppose ? All the Israelites fast, on that day, throughout the whole world. That in itself is something."

Hélène inclined over a picture of Taku a passably anxious face ; Justin had stopped looking at the pictures and was blushing as he listened.

M. Le Pleynier had puffed out his chest ; he tried to be humorous : " Twenty-four hours, you say ? You don't include the night ? "

" We are not supposed to sleep."

" You are joking ! You go without sleep ? "

Joseph gave a hearty laugh.

" I sleep, yes ; but neither my father, nor my uncle . . ."

" What ? Monsieur Hippolyte S—"

" Yes, the older generation."

" Pffff ! And these gentlemen remain on their feet all night reading Hebrew, with little caps on their heads ? "

Joseph nodded in assent.

" And why do not you follow their example ? "

" The custom is dying out."

" But you don't understand a word of what you are reading ? "

" My father and uncle understand. Most of the Jews in Alsace know Hebrew."

" Well, then, are these gentlemen convinced of their ultimate absolution ? "

" I know nothing about it. We have never talked about it."

" Never talked about it ? Never discussed it ? "

" No," the Alsatian replied calmly. " It is always done. It is our hallmark."

" There it is, the ant ! " Hélène said to herself with an intolerable mingling of horror and nervous strain. She had, for an instant, the feeling that it was no longer her father who was " winning," but Joseph Simler. And this was to her a novel spectacle.

" Well then, if you have already eliminated the night, what will the young generation do," M. Le Pleynier went on in an aggressive tone, pointing the bowl of his pipe at Justin, who was frozen stiff with shame, " after they have been educated in the lycées of the Republic ? "

" I know nothing about it. I never had time to go to college, you know. It's nothing to boast of. I am as ignorant as a block of wood." (At this point, a glance at Hélène.) " But I don't think that education makes any difference to *that*."

" *Sacrebleu*, if you are French citizens, what need have you to be also . . . ahem ! citizens of Israel ? "

" Is it you who ask me that, Monsieur Le Pleynier ? People take good care to remind us. Did not the Cercle du Com—"

" Quite right, yes. . . . After all . . . A band of idiots and savages. But you have just emerged from your native fastness, Monsieur Simler, without being any the worse for that. People do not know you. Whereas in twenty years' time, these . . ." and once again he pointed the bowl of his pipe at Justin.

" It is possible," Joseph replied laconically, with a swelling of admiration and pride as he looked at his nephew, " but then they will know better than we what they have to do."

Hélène could not endure any more. The boy, by her side, as grinding his teeth. She interrupted the conversation : 'You are boring us, Papa, with these stories. Everyone

acts as he thinks fit. Why don't you show your griffons to Monsieur . . . ? "

She laid her hand on the arm of the child who raised towards her a pair of eyes from which the last trace of confidence, of condescension even, had vanished. But Hélène's smile had evidently the power to melt his black cloud as butter melts in the sun, for he succeeded in uttering, in a hoarse whisper : " Justin."

The girl then completed her sentence, confirming with a glance this unspoken reconciliation : ". . . why don't you show your griffons to Monsieur Justin ? "

" Come along ! " said M. Le Pleynier. He could always rely upon his daughter to get him out of an awkward situation.

X

Hélene could do herself the justice of admitting that she had done nothing to help Joseph to find himself by her side, in the garden, and everything to prevent him.

But, restored to the glory of his griffons, M. Le Pleynier had distrusted the weaver's enthusiasm. As soon as his daughter had gone to put on her gloves and hat, he had taken Justin's arm in his and carried him off in the direction of the kennels, hopping along the ground with a surprising agility, to make the child laugh.

And so, what ought not to have happened had every facility for coming to pass.

" You do not go out much, Mademoiselle," said Joseph, by way of a start. How was it that he managed to keep every trace of silliness or commonplace out of these half-dozen hackneyed words ?

" Gracious, no," replied Hélène. She bent her brows and gazed remotely, with a pained recognition, at the country which had kept company with her for two and twenty years.

The Le Pleynier house was built on the edge of the plain.

A strip of twenty-five acres, long and narrow, lay between it and the main entrance to the property, and the Nantes road. A large grove of forest pines, artificial meadows, a kitchen garden and a sort of Norman close, planted with apple-trees and black cherries, formed the upper part of the estate.

The dwelling-house, which dated from the Regency, stood facing the road. It exposed, to the south, three sides of a rectangle open towards the valley, overlooking clumps of ancient trees and wide low pastures. Beyond the sunken channel of the river, there rose, on the farther bank, an ascending slope of red tilled land. Lastly, dominating the whole scene, the mighty shoulder of the plain resumed possession of the horizon half a league farther off, and stretched away to the south carrying its burden of parks, harvest fields, elms and light.

Summer was at an end. The blue of the sky still remained almost mineral. But the mark of autumn was already visible on the under-side of every leaf.

Joseph was never to forget the brilliance of this day, nor the astonishing red glow of the creepers that covered the walls of the house.

He cast his eyes round about him : " I can understand," he said. The tone of his voice made Hélène bend her brows yet farther. She gazed despairingly down into the valley, and advanced rapidly along the path on which her father had preceded her.

" Why, oh why ? " she thought, while the blood surged to the tips of her ears. An apprehension of the inevitable lurked in each of his words, and gave it its flavour.

He had the sense not to run after her and keep by her side. She heard his step keeping pace with her own : " There —the pitiless activity of the ant ! "

" Have you not a brother, Mademoiselle ? "

" Yes, indeed."

" Is he like you ? "

Hélène looked at the questioner. She could perceive nothing but fear and timidity. A pair of meek eyes were turned towards her with a fervent humility. She felt almost as though a lump of ice had been laid between her shapely shoulders.

But it is not untrue to maintain that laughter is the best tempered weapon that has been given us to resist the assaults of the Evil One. Those whom nature has endowed with it are unconscious of their own power.

Hélène's laugh flashed forth like the irresistible dart of an April sun. It had a marvellous variety, being, according to circumstances, a token of understanding, an offer of friendship, a message of esteem, praise, reserve, an evasive response, a refusal untinged with bitterness. One expression only was lacking from it : mockery. Abundant joy in life does not go with the offensive spirit. Besides, the risk is great ; a woman does not venture upon mockery save in extreme cases. To attack is to admit equality. In all other circumstances, silence or gaiety is the weapon to adopt.

Hélène's laughter could intervene to dispel, in conversation, the stagnant mists in which misunderstandings are bred. It circulated like a keen, invigorating air. And it was all the more surprising in that it was not in harmony with the tone of her voice, which was normally grave and if anything slightly subdued.

As for the man who failed to play up to certain sprightliness, like that of an old sister of charity, he was doomed never to understand anything of the character of Mlle. Le Pleynier.

Having then turned over and weighed in all its bearings the question put to her by this man who was now engaged in tugging his moustaches, Hélène let her eyes stray back to her valley and burst out laughing : " Is he like me ? Ah, the dear boy ! He would be greatly embarrassed if he were."

" And why ? " inquired a voice muffled like the sound of a distant drum.

The friendly laugh broke out more irresistibly than before : " Why ? Because he has already as much Le Pleynier blood in his veins as is good for him, and a little drop more would prevent him from having any sort of career."

Joseph allowed himself to be captivated by this gay humour :

" It is a very terrible thing then, that blood ? "

" You may well say so," replied Hélène, taking care not to meet his eye. There shone in her own eyes a sparkle which was not to be misinterpreted, as it were a ripple of overflowing vitality. She added, in the gentlest tone that she could assume, at this instant in which she felt as though she held the world in her hand like a ball : " Blood of foolish, idle, independent people. Not at all suited to the public service."

" But, Monsieur your brother is . . ."

" An officer ? Don't talk about them ! They think about nothing but their promotion and their cliques. A fine mess they've made of France ! Haven't all the defeated generals been decorated and promoted, with one exception ? "

" And who is that ? "

" Who ? Denfert-Rochereau."

The girl's brows shot down for the second time, like a pair of sash-windows. Joseph was entirely ignorant of all public questions. He looked upon every officer as a born hero.

" I meddle with things that are not my business," she went on, resuming an air of gaiety. " My brother Julien is an excellent fellow, who is so foolish as to imagine himself a Legitimist because he has a good seat on a horse and makes out that he has noble blood. A Le Pleynier must always have a fad of some sort."

" Do you see him often ? " Joseph inquired. The idea of this horseman displeased him.

" No, not very often. He hunts a great deal, with genuine nobles and sham ones. And then there are the intrigues which take up most of those gentlemen's time. They imagine that they are conspiring whenever a group of them get together to sneer at Thiers or Gambetta."

Joseph opened his mouth uneasily : " Your father, is he . . . ? "

" My father ? He was the Republican candidate, last year ; he was in prison for a week, at the Coup d'État. It was in that wood, look, that the gendarmes were ambushed, and there is the road on which they arrested him and my Uncle Julien, as they were coming back from partridge shooting. No, you must leave my father out of that," she concluded with a smile. He was disagreeably impressed by this manner of treating the most formidable masculine interests. He wondered in what way he might himself fall a victim to this irony, the indulgence of which, at the moment, escaped his notice. He found all this vivacity disconcerting. And Joseph Simler remembered suddenly that his idea of women had always been that of a modest, silent, frail and gently exacting creature.

None of these fluctuations was lost upon Hélène. She could not help murmuring, with harsh blend of contempt and relief : " Heaven be praised ! He is *like* the rest."

But Joseph was not *like* the rest. This was indeed one of the things that distinguished the firm of Simler. He was the man who is frightened and tempted by the unknown. It must not be forgotten that Benjamin, who had embarked for the New World, was his cousin, and that Guillaume, who had decided upon the purchase of the Poncet factory, was his brother.

There was another thing that prevented him from being like the rest—namely, that however much he might reason about events and arrive at false conclusions, his mind still remained open to any fresh sensation.

Now, in the present instance, two sensations prevailed in his mind : the first was one of exhilaration at this feminine society. He was making one surprising discovery after another. Hermine, Elisa, Mina, even Sarah—none of these honest housewives had prepared him for such an adventure.

Moreover, it was beyond question that the " dear and great friend " was not exaggerating when she spoke to her Hélène of her " Wingless Victory " figure. Hélène was extremely beautiful. Even the supreme advantage of a perfect skin was not lacking, with that piquancy which Rome never succeeded in discerning in Greek marbles. With her suppleness, strength, harmony of motion (" the expression of Minerva in the body of the Amazonian Venus " was another of her old friend's tributes), Mlle. Le Pleynier furnished that so rare combination, in which pure femininity loses none of its rights and acquires all the others.

Nothing is less in the fashion of the times, whatever fashion, whatever times be in question. And so no man until then had observed this phenomenon save with alarm. " Hélène will die an old maid " had been Madame Le Pleynier's last words, on her deathbed, to her " dear and great friend." And no one had ever yet discovered a single occasion upon which the late Madame Le Pleynier had been proved wrong.

Nevertheless, arriving upon the scene with a fresh vision and an ingenuous spirit, Joseph found no reason in his heart to restrain him from feeling Hélène's beauty as keenly as a woman's beauty can be felt by a man.

This explains why, just as he was succumbing to these disagreeable impressions, the gesture with which the girl straightened the shawl on her shoulders and round her neck reverberated in the darkest recesses of his being.

" Haaah ! " was the cry that sounded in those dark recesses. And his heart began to throb.

He thought it due to a lingering trace of rancour to

declare, drily : " Well, you know, I have no education, and really I have not the time to take an interest in that sort f thing."

" I understand you perfectly. The most trivial occupation is less sterile."

" But you must have some opinion about these matters, since you are a Republican . . ."

" Lord, yes," she replied, not without amusement. " Only with me it is a matter of instinct, it's the Le Pleynier blood that decides."

" Your brother, then . . ."

" My brother derives his royalism from the few drops of Villepin blood that we have in our veins."

" From the . . ."

" My mother was a Villepin. But she derived all her character from my grandmother, who was a *bourgeoise*, a Bazinette. The true-blue Villepins have never believed in anything that was not quite correct."

" You go back a long way ? " asked Joseph, simply, after a pause. Hélène smiled.

" A family of lawyers. We have always had a weakness for scrivening. But every family goes back a long way."

He blushed as he answered : " Of course. I think it is better not to bother about it."

" And why ? "

" Because it is not good for us to torment ourselves with questions about our origin and from where we derive our good and bad qualities."

" It is quite true that, if you are looking for men of action, you are not likely to find them among us."

" I imagine," Joseph Simler pursued, flushing a deep crimson, " that you *too* regard action as the essential thing ? "

" Oh, the dear simple fellow ! " thought Mlle. Le Pleynier. She gazed at him, and it was with the utmost seriousness that she replied : " Unquestionably ! "

As for him, the onslaught of those eyes, more abounding than ever in indulgence and vitality, made him lose his head.

(" They are not grey," he told himself indignantly, " they are violet.") " I could not conceive a life devoted to anything else . . ." (" than what I am doing," he ought to have said) " than a struggle. To go ahead, to be always advancing, and to take the lead, whatever your goal may be, I hold that that is the principal duty of man. In any case, it is not possible to find another that is preferable, because the effort to become the first, wherever you may be, is always difficult, and does not leave you time to think . . . of other things. If everyone thought only of performing his task as well as possible, there would be no need of all these laws and discussions. However, talk never prevents anyone from filling the place that he ought to fill."

Hélène listened to him, curious and slightly flushed. He tugged his moustaches again with his hand, which, plump as it was, was white and muscular, and felt the need of her approval : " Don't you agree with me ? "

" I think that you have expressed admirably the ideal of many healthy-minded men. Possibly the human race is not exclusively composed of men who are altogether healthy, in that sense, and what seems to us most alien to ourselves is at the same time indispensable to the world. Besides," she added with a laugh, " you are right to speak as you do ; a woman might think rather differently, from her own point of view."

" A woman ? "

" A woman, yes. While approving without reservation of what you say, she might not very well be able to follow your rule of life. It takes wood to make a fire, but it takes water to make wood."

" I must seem to you very absurd."

" Absurd ? Good heavens ! "

" I have read nothing, I know nothing, and you who . . ." he said, reversing his opinion with a regal unconsciousness.

" Oh, for pity's sake, do not attempt to compare a busy life with a woman's idleness."

" There is something else."

" What do you mean by that ? "

" Yes, yes. I know a number of . . . I am surrounded by women who . . ."

When a man has arrived at the point at which he begins to compare a woman with the rest of the world, and to bring her that world timidly in the hollow of his hand, as though it were a present of no value, then is the time for that woman to discover her own true nature. Hélène's blood ceased to flow, for the space of a breath, then began again, in time for her to parry in haste : " I have neither husband nor children to look after, Sir," she began, attempting to drown Joseph's speech in an unctuous flow of words. " I do not speak of my father, who is the least difficult man in the world to surround, nor of this house which runs by itself, with a staff of old servants. A girl left to herself finds ten times more leisure than she needs to . . ."

He cut her short, in a tone of authority : " It is not that at all, Mademoiselle. The women of whom I am speaking have never had four ideas in their heads." He checked himself. " It would be wrong to reproach them with their want of education. Besides, their way of life . . ."

" This man is goodness incarnate," thought Hélène.

" But, let me explain, what they lack is something different, it is . . ."

He raised his head, looked round about him, and heaved a deep sigh, followed by an abrupt silence.

Fifteen paces farther on began the display of the griffons. Hélène dreaded each of those fifteen paces ; and the burden of the silence seemed to her heavier than she could have imagined.

She felt Joseph's eyes upon her—twice. But could she prevent her gait from being the motion of the prow of a ship plunging through the waves?

Could she prevent the man who was walking by her side —*the first man* that she had ever met—from beginning to tremble like a child?

M. Le Pleynier was very proud of his griffons. He had arrived at the breed by judicious crossings. They bore his name: "Le Pleynier griffons." They had won a prize in London. Indeed, he had just presented a couple to M. Thiers, and was delighted to show you the autograph letter which he had received from him, although, in his heart of hearts, he felt nothing but contempt for the fierce little veteran.

Halting before the bars of the kennel he explained the dogs' points to Justin, with emphasis rather than with accuracy of detail.

The kennel was quite well kept. Seven wiry mops of brown hair, animated by a perpetual agitation, were flying from side to side, at express speed, each upon four woollen muffs, wagging a stump of furry tail. The precious detail of their truffle-like noses, the carmine of their throats, the pink of their tongues, and most of all the pairs of gimlet-holes which their eyes filled with a black glow, at once so vivid and so deep, gave an animated appearance to these bundles.

They leaped up and down in the air, like jacks-in-the-box, and barked themselves hoarse in honour of man.

M. Le Pleynier exhibited with pride a system of sleeping-pens invented by Hilaire. The roof opened by means of a pair of hinges, like the lid of a box, which made it easier to clean out the place.

And yet the griffons looked dirty and had an unpleasant smell. Everywhere there recurred this curious blend of neglect and attention which had already struck Joseph, at the time of his former visit, as a sign of dilettantism, and which contrasted so profoundly with the domestic cleanliness which

Sarah and Hermine carried to the pitch of a shameless persecution.

M. Le Pleynier did not have all the satisfaction that he had expected. For Hélène's cat, having come to join them, slipped with arched back between the visitors and the kennel. The griffons followed her movments with gaping jaws from behind the bars.

Justin was far more keenly interested in the cat than in the dogs. Hilaire, appearing at the critical moment, beckoned to him, and carried him off to see, in a basket lined with a cast-off woollen garment, six sightless kittens, the litter of the previous week. The fierce strategist of the sixth form discovered that he possessed the heart of a little child and was not ashamed to show his emotion.

When he was on his homeward road, entirely taken up with the kittens, he did not fail to notice that Uncle Joseph appeared nervous. He walked with a jerky step, breathed hoarsely, and kept turning his head to right and left, as though he were suffocating.

Intercepting his nephew's uneasy glance, he took him up suddenly in his arms and planted a kiss upon each of his cheeks.

" *We* have spent a happy day ? "

Justin nodded his head, making a grimace with his lips : too much woman, too much Old Gentleman, too many inconsequent remarks, he decided in his heart of hearts. The strange pleasure that his uncle seemed to value so highly was indeed slightly embarrassing to the nephew, even although he could not tell what the matter was. Who, indeed, could have told ?

Yes. Justin learned something that same evening, when, at dinner time, a ring at the bell preceded the jubilant entry of Hilaire, carrying a little brown basket, with a note for Monsieur Justin.

" What a horror ! " exclaimed Grandmamma, when, from

the basket lined with clean cloth, Justin extracted a blind kitten. The letter ran :

> MONSIEUR JUSTIN,
>
> You appear to be fond of kittens. Here is one. Feed it on nothing but milk for a month and see that it has a little heap of cinders. It will look after everything else itself. My father and I were delighted to make your acquaintance. Come again as often as you like. And please invite Mademoiselle Laure to come with you.
>
> Your friend,
>
> HÉLÈNE LE PLEYNIER.

XI

THE FEET OF THE DANCERS BEAT ON THE SOUNDING-BOARD OF the floor like rhythmical showers of small gravel. The oil lamps swing on their wires, and circumscribe the extent of the shadows beneath. The oxidised flakes of their last leaves indicate the position of the shrubberies. The regular patrons nevertheless find the seclusion which they deem necessary for their exploits ; soothing violins sound through the branches ; grisettes offer the resistance that is expected of them ; now and again the sharp sound of a slap rouses the energy of the orchestra, which responds, to the great delight of the public, with a rude noise on the trombone.

Two acidulated violins, a cornet (for sentiment), a trombone and a cello (for awkward moments) distribute rhythm and love to the two hundred patrons who keep moving among the cast-iron tables and leafless lilacs, beneath the uncertain favours of a warm November sky. But the orchestra grows animated. Cora and Léocadie have gathered up their dubious draperies in their hands and the *chahut* begins.

A lad from one of the humbler outskirts, in a threadbare

jacket, muffler and cloth cap, stands up to face them and thus pays for his right to sip the Suresne of the establishment. Two men in corduroys, whose flowing locks grease their shoulders as their imperials grease their chests, come forward arm in arm to offer themselves as partners, without relinquishing their pipes. A moment later, there is nothing but a whirl of legs and down-at-heel slippers.

"That looks like business," shouts a jubilant voice. Only a few couples of sentimental dancers insist upon keeping the floor in an intense silence, and turn their backs upon the cancan, with the smiles of waxwork figures.

Four groups have formed for *chahut*. Thread stockings, silk stockings, woollen socks, cotton socks, slippers, high heels, patent leather boots, rope soles, patched soles, kick the lamps up to the ceiling and hammer the boards of the floor.

The wretched two franc musicians grow excited in earnest. They break off playing, streaming with perspiration, to utter wild cries and bang their instruments with their fists. The figures become muddled, ladies and their squires gambol about, slap their thighs, and utter loud exclamations. A circle is formed round a pseudo-painter, capped *à la* Fra Diavolo, who, pipe in hand, is spinning round at such speed that his legs are visible only in a mist.

The orchestra expires breathlessly with a bray from the cornet supported by an unrehearsed trill from the trombone. A volley of protest resounds. A first violin turns to face his audience. He embarks upon a speech which is drowned amid animal cries. An ovation is made to his honest alcoholic head, fringed with a quadrogenarian mane. The women scream with the full force of their lungs, the men execute their final pirouettes, sprinkling the floor with a generous libation of sweat.

The clamour dies down. Cheap brandy and cherries in spirit are brought in to moisten the interlude.

The company is not promiscuous. Soft felt hats indicate

artists, bowlers, wrestlers and journalists, cloth caps bullies. Studios and slums fraternise. No bourgeois ventures upon the heights of Montmartre, after dark, save an occasional party of bankers or diplomats, escorted by policemen in plain clothes.

This is why the entry of four tall hats creates a sensation. Comfortable winter greatcoats enlarge the figures of the wearers. They have cigars in their mouths, and sport the jovial complexion of people whom a copious dinner has sent up to explore these heights, from the *Anglais* or *Voisin*.

A waiter hastens to clear a table for them. The newcomers take their seats, looking round them with the provoking smile that is bred of nervousness. The great mill-sails that cut off the sky, to right and left of them, distract their attention. They are flushed after scrambling up the path which climbs the hill between vineyards and hedges. They cannot overcome their amazement at the myriad stars which Paris scatters below their feet.

" A perfect Milky Way," says one of them with an emphasis that seeks to disguise itself in jocularity.

" Counter-jumpers who've made their pile," a hissing voice remarks. The four men turn simultaneously. But, at a signal from the proprietor, the orchestra starts a mazurka. The women rise, calling to one another ; their backs appear hollow above bustles which convert plump and lean alike into Callipygean Venuses.

Cora, whom the whole of Montmartre comes up to watch dancing at the *Moulin de la Galette*, refuses male partners, takes Anaïs in her arms and begins to waltz slowly to the broken rhythm of the mazurka.

Her skirt brushes the knees of the men seated round a bottle of Hermitage. Her large blue eyes pass indifferently over them. She allows the inevitable effect to be created. The four men look at one another with awkward laughter and conceal their blushes in their glasses.

" Very curious, this ball-room."

" Pooh ! There are plenty like it at Neuilly."

" Do you get this view at Neuilly, or at the Barrière du Trône ? "

" And what character ! There are at least a dozen men in the room who are wanted by the police, rubbing shoulders with eminent musicians and well-known painters," adds he who is acting as guide. The grumbler is still not satisfied :

" At the Halles . . . "

" I know the Halles as well as you do ; there is a low atmosphere there that I do not like. What I find surprising here is the ease and good tone. And do you consider that the scenery on the way from the Italiens here is not worth looking at ? "

" What ! I nearly broke my neck four times coming up, and it wasn't exactly a bed of roses."

" But you, Monsieur Simler, what do you think of it ? "

" I ? " replies the Alsatian, as he straightens his spectacles and cracks the middle finger of his right hand against the palm of his left. " I ? I am perfectly happy."

His flushed features testify moreover to a satisfaction which he would find it hard to deny. The whirl of the dance brings towards them again the floating skirt, dreaming gaze and vivid complexion of Cora. The men are silent. She passes. They remark, each of them to himself, the way in which her arm lies along the shoulders of the ruddy Anaïs, and the golden throat outlined by a coral necklace. The unseeing eyes stray over them once again. Each of them thinks that he has detected an imperceptible wink addressed to himself alone.

" The women are really not bad," Joseph adds, stretching himself. But his observation is received in silence. Something has turned dry between his lips.

" I like a waltz," says one of the smokers at length, thinking

of the sensual curve of Cora's hip. This remark is greeted with sundry grunts of approval.

A Parisian customer is giving this select party. It is Saturday evening. Myrtil and Hippolyte have acknowledged that Joseph could not decline the invitation, and so here he is, happy and free from remorse.

For the third time, Cora sweeps past them. Anaïs multiplies her signs and her bursts of laughter. The orchestra stops playing. Farmyard cries resound. A spasm of emotion grips the four men. But, dignified as a classical statue, Cora detaches herself from Anaïs and returns to her own table.

" Come along, we didn't climb up here to sit glued to our chairs. Which is the best dancer of us four ? "

" Sure to be Monsieur Simler. An Alsatian must be fond of waltzing. . . ."

Joseph does not resist for longer than it takes him to subdue a sudden burning sensation in his ears. Just as the violinist, refreshed with beer, rises to his feet and gives the signal to his team, he gets up and takes off his greatcoat.

The whole room utters a prolonged " Ah ! " From covert winks to nudgings of elbows and whisperings, the four strangers have somehow become the central attraction. Art students, prowlers, workmen and girls have decided to look to them for their evening's amusement. The well-dressed man must pay his forfeit.

This " Ah ! " continues and turns to a far from cordial mutter. The three cigar-smokers turn pale. As for Joseph, foursquare, calm and smiling, he turns his head from side to side in surprise.

" He'll do it, no he won't—he'll dance, he won't—come along ducky—goldilocks—he won't have the courage, he will—the spectacle bird—which is he going to ask ?—Just look this way, dearie—he's too stout, I don't like him !—Hahaha !—don't swagger ! "

Farmyard cries and catcalls. The musicians give up their attempt and turn, interested, to watch.

Meanwhile Joseph has started on his course, very upright in his short jacket. He does not hesitate, but makes his way towards the table at which Cora is heedlessly sipping an orangeade.

" Get on with it, then—no, don't be frightened !—Cora ? should like to see !—Hey, Mimi—Mimi, Mimi ! Sst !—This way, Mimi !—don't accept him, Cora !—Mimi !—he won't have the courage, et cetera."

A long-limbed rascal in a tight corduroy suit comes slipping serpent fashion between the chairs ahead of him, like a herald :

" Ladies 'n gents. Pr'sent t'yr notice t'night a natural curiosity of the most remarkable kind, a genuine native of the Sentier quarter, the true and autochthonous aborigine from the treacle stores of the Marais, bred by crossing the tardigrade bear from New Zealand with the spectacled woman, variety known as . . ."

But a hand falls upon his velveteen shoulder and thrusts the jester aside with a significant firmness. The round face, with protruding brow and chin, bristling with a fair moustache, is of so menacing a hue that the buffoon hastens to change his game. He dissolves in clownish gambollings.

Everyone is standing up. Joseph reaches Cora. She pretends not to have seen him approach, raises her head, receives his smile, rises to her feet, and, with an audacious sweeping stare lays her bare arm in the hand that is held out to her.

" I was expecting you," she murmurs in his ear. Her expression rids the words of all vulgarity.

The room rings with applause. The band strikes up the waltz a second time. No other couple takes the floor. Joseph embarks upon the scrubbed, uneven boards, with the best dancer in Montmartre.

But the Best Dancer soon realises that they are not ill-matched. The grace and lightness of this stout young man are surprising. Almost without movements, with an easy sliding of his toes and the deliberate swaying of his shoulders, Joseph Simler seems to be commanding the rhythm rather than conforming to it. He dances without an effort, as it were under the flying tails of his coat. He holds Cora carefully in his rounded arm, like a fragile object. And Cora abandons herself to his dexterity. The entire room accompanies with a stamping of feet, clapping of hands, and a curt "ha!" each first beat of the triple waltz-time. The pace increases. No sign of effort on Joseph's glowing face. He avoids the tendency to whirl lightly round at the end of a waltz. He merely lengthens his gliding steps, and gives his partner all the pleasures of virtuosity by whisking her round him without appearing himself to shift his ground.

When the four gentlemen leave the ballroom, an hour later, Joseph has declined any number of courteous invitations to what had been the most hostile tables, and the wealthy customer has met the fire of two or three conversations with their nearest neighbours.

"Lucky dog!" says the wealthy customer to the Alsatian, and pinches his arm. The night receives the homage of Joseph's smile.

A telegram will inform Vendeuvre of his return by the last train on Sunday night. Tintin will not go with his uncle for their weekly walk, Laure will not have her Sunday evening serenade on the flute.

On the other hand, Cora receives to her surprise the homage of a sensuality the warmth of which is less surprising than its delicacy. And Joseph does not exhaust, in twenty hours of rigorous isolation with her, his display of marvels as refined as they are natural.

He has had to wait until he is in his thirtieth year before tasting a happiness which requires to be won even after it

has been bought, and lips that have no experience of thralldom.

So that all the pleasure will not have been on his side? And the games of life are, when all is said, worth only the value of our fellow-player.

XII

JOSEPH IS DISTINCTLY TIRED WHEN HE CLIMBS, THE FOLLOWING evening, into his second-class compartment. November is driving its keenest blasts through the cracks in the woodwork. The young man stretches himself out on the narrow bench covered in blue cloth, draws a deep breath and shuts his eyes.

A cascade, as harsh as the fall of a pile of plates, bursts out so close to his ear that he starts up in a sitting posture, uttering a string of exclamations. A young man is bending over him with a confused expression.

"I had to warn you. Excuse my awakening you, but we are just getting there."

"Getting there? Where?"

"Vendeuvre."

The young man smiles without succeeding in concealing a sort of astonishment. The train is jolting over points, and seems to be flying through the night over a clatter of paving stones.

"Good Lord! Then I have been asleep for four hours? Thank you, Sir," Joseph adds, rising to his feet. He discovers that he is awake and alert.

"Oh, it was the least I could do," says the young man, with the evident intention of not allowing the conversation to lapse. Joseph seems to recognise him. He is a tall young fellow, smartly dressed, with dark eyes rather close together on either side of a long nose; the fair moustaches barely

conceal a delicate mouth ; in the expression, a blend of social discretion, feminine irony and that frigid courtesy which is taught by the " Good Fathers," an air of surprising sincerity and simplicity predominate. Joseph bursts out laughing.

" But for you, I should have awakened in the station at Bordeaux."

" You're a sound sleeper. I've been watching you since we left Paris. You never knew that a lot of people had got in and out ? "

" Heavens, no. But you know me, then ? "

" You know me by name, yourself. I am Hector Lefombère."

" Is it you that I see passing four times a day along the Boulevard du Grand Cerf ? "

" On my way between the works and my father's house ? Yes," says the young man with a detachment that appears slightly affected.

Whereupon, " delighted to make your acquaintance," says Joseph. He rises and shakes the other's hand not without a certain coldness.

" I am even more delighted. . . . We have still ten minutes. I have long been wishing to make yours. And, my word, I am more anxious than ever since yesterday evening."

Joseph stares at him. The fair young man smiles : " You didn't know that I was in the dancing-room at the *Moulin de la Galette ?* "

" You ? "

" That makes two occasions on which I know something that you do not. I was there with a few friends, and we had taken the precaution of going ' disguised as artists ' so as not to attract attention."

The thought that he was seen at the *Moulin* is extremely disagreeable to Joseph. He makes no reply, and busies himself with folding up his travelling rug. But the voice of young Lefombère with its liquid modulations persists,

endeavouring to drown the racket of the train: "I was there all the time. Forgive my accidental indiscretion, and allow me to express my admiration for your enterprise. I was with a group of fellows who are not generally regarded as cowards; none of us would have had the nerve that you showed. I've never seen a roomful of people so entirely conquered. Not, however, that it surprises me . . . in your case."

Joseph is astonished to find the other's face filled with timidity and hesitation.

"Yes, I am delighted to have found an opportunity . . . You don't understand, do you?"

Joseph makes a sign with his chin, his hands being engaged with the straps of his rug.

"Can't I help you? No? I was saying that you must be surprised when you hear me speak like this. We have behaved rather . . . caddishly towards you, in our venerable city of Vendeuvre. If you had known the country better, and the fossils . . . However, that was not and will not be of the least importance. Only, I wanted to let you know that it is possible to be born a Vendévoriate and yet not be an absolute clod."

The Alsatian still seems doubtful.

"I assure you, I am flattered . . ."

"No, no, no flattery about it, Monsieur Simler. I have spoken to you frankly and doubtless clumsily, as a decent-hearted man who has been more pained than yourselves by the insult that was offered you, and has watched you living and working here for the last year with no less sympathy than admiration. You can make of that what you please."

Joseph seized and wrung his hand:

"Fery goot, you give me great pleasure, that is what I can say to you, Monsieur Lefombère. If it were only the respect that I feel for your father . . ."

It is curious, how the least emotion strengthens Joseph's accent.

" Oh, my father is a worthy man, but you must not expect anything from him outside his shooting and his Club. You may be sure that he voted without knowing what it was about."

The first lights of the Vendeuvre station brighten the windows of the compartment. A series of points catch the carriage in its turn, and make it leap up and down. Standing up and clinging to the racks, the travellers collect their luggage. Their shoulders come in contact, and they smile at each other, in the glimmer of the platform lamp.

" I have heard a lot about you," shouts Hector Lefombère, who overtops Joseph by at least half a head.

" Where was that ? "

" At the Le Pleyniers'."

" At the . . . ? "

" The Le Pley-niers' ! I believe you know them ? "

" Yes . . . slightly."

The train slows down. Lefombère resumes his seat, crosses his long legs, and slips his arm through the arm-rest, as though he were preparing to spend the rest of the night in the carriage.

" Charming people," he says, gazing at Joseph with his dark eyes which are rather too close together.

" Extremely," Joseph replies in a non-committal tone.

" A curious fellow, the old man ! "

" A man of great merit."

" And the daughter, eh ? "

" The daughter ? " Joseph repeats, in embarrassment.

" Interesting, original. But devilish odd."

" Odd . . . yes . . . Or rather, no. I don't find her so."

Joseph is ready to swear that the expression in the eyes that are scrutinising him grows more sly every moment. Yet young Lefombère goes on :

" You know what they call her ? "

" . . . ? "

" The Clandestine. Not bad, eh ? The Clandestine ! Don't you agree ? "

And he laughs. The train crawls into the station. The penurious darkness of the interior is punctuated by six butterflies of gas which the wind keeps perpetually moving within their grimy glass lanterns. Joseph jumps down upon the platform, balancing a fairly light travelling-bag in each hand. He notices that young Lefombère hands the ticket-collector the yellow pasteboard of the first-class, from which it may be supposed that his fellow-traveller has sacrificed his own comfort for Joseph's sake.

It is now eleven o'clock. It is not raining, but ragged black clouds darken the sky and the wind howls at every cross-roads.

" We go more or less the same way," says Hector Lefombère.

" Unless you are taking a cab," Joseph puts out.

" The one thing I like is walking at night against the wind."

" We're off, then."

They set forth, their greatcoats clinging to their legs and their bodies bent double. The young man's last speech has destroyed Joseph's flow of conversation. He cannot, however, refrain from inquiring, in an indifferent tone : " Do you see much of the Le Pleyniers ? "

" The old boys go out shooting together, my mother thinks it her duty to go up to Le Plantis twice a month. I am usually roped in to go with her. Last time, old Le Pleynier could talk of nothing but yourself, my dear fellow. That was by no means the most boring day I have spent there. I was all the more delighted with the way he spoke about you because there were in the room a dozen of my most idiotic fellow-citizens who had to listen in silence. It doesn't do to answer back Papa Le Pleynier."

In this way Joseph learns that he and his family are still as fruitful a topic of local conversation as on the day of their arrival. Lefombère goes on, with that aristocratic familiarity which men trained in monastic schools retain in their subsequent relations with their fellows, and which consists in letting the lower lip droop above a stiffly protruding chin—a procedure highly recommended for moderating the voice and for expressing coldness, self-assurance and superiority.

" It seems that you have even found favour with the Clandestine. You must give us your recipe."

" I don't understand what you mean by that," Joseph answers brutally.

" I'm not saying that she sang your praises in so many words. Mademoiselle Le Pleynier does not commit herself to that extent. She did not run you down, my dear fellow, and that in itself is a great deal."

This expression irritates Joseph : " Run me down ? "

" Yes, in two or three of those words of which she has the secret, which pin a man down like a butterfly on a cork. And when Papa Le Pleynier went on chanting your praises in the most pompous language, she nodded her head over her embroidery and uttered in a decisive tone a : ' That is all quite true,' which made us all sit up ! " Hector Lefombère becomes speechless with laughter.

A neck of dull gold presents itself to Joseph's vision. A slightly abrupt gait carries ahead of him the full curve of the most supple of backs ; the sunlight falls upon the pearly strand of a brow, and a pair of violet eyes gaze into his with an insupportable blend of indulgence, irony and fervent lassitude. The vision is so clear that Joseph finds himself remarking : " *What's more*, her eyes are larger and wider apart than anyone's else in the world."

But a pair of haunches which belong to another of God's creatures comes unexpectedly to complete this image. A

swelling abdomen, traversed by a downy furrow. The man explores its softness with the tip of each of his fingers. A pair of gleaming, muscular arms raise their hands to clasp an admirable Bordelaise bosom, and a surprised, plebeian voice, betraying a trace of emotion, the voice of Cora, says as she holds out the purple points of her breasts towards the lips of her lover : " Here you are, since you must. Ah-ah-ah, little . . ."

The latent Centaur in man rears before the ambiguity of the Centauress. But while the animal is neighing within him, Joseph is gripped by anguish. The malicious nickname that young Lefombère revealed to him just now assumes, in his mind, an almost religious significance. By what right is he associating the image of the Clandestine with that of his debauches ? Is it not a form of violation ? Hélène's name appears to Joseph as a sort of masonic symbol ; he is in no doubt as to his own initiation ; that another should be initiated, and, what is more, this great idiot with the silky hair, who is humming a popular song by his side, is more than he feels himself in the humour to stand.

" I forbid you, do you hear me, I forbid you to speak of Mademoiselle Le Pleynier like that," he shouts—or is preparing to shout . . .

For at this moment, the tall fellow throws back his head uneasily, sniffs the air, shoots out his neck and cries : " I should say there was something burning, over there ! "

XIII

The coming of the Simlers to Vendeuvre had endowed the town with a permanent source of interest. If they remained more or less invisible at ordinary times, and did not, as the saying goes, do their business on the housetops, if adventures such as the world-famous excursion with M. Antigny's mare were not to be repeated, on the other hand,

as soon as the fine weather came in 1872, and thereafter invariably, the citizens of Vendeuvre had been permitted to enjoy, every Sunday evening, a very curious spectacle : at the stroke of eight, the little iron-sheeted door upon the Boulevard du Grand Cerf opened with a clang, and M. Hippolyte emerged, followed by M. Myrtil.

It was their weekly outing. They appeared, on these evenings, dressed in black frock coats, and with silk hats on their heads. But whereas M. Hippolyte's hat was concave, broad-brimmed, planted vertically on his head and pulled down over his eyebrows, M. Myrtil's was strictly cylindrical, with a narrow brim and a tendency to cover the nape of his neck and to expose his forehead. Apart from this detail, the mutual conformity of the pair was most impressive.

They advanced side by side, at a stiff and solemn pace. As a rule they did not converse. Their itinerary was unvaried.

They first of all turned to the left along the Boulevard du Grand Cerf, crossed Pont-Achard, climbed the long slope to the railway station, branched off along the former Boulevard Impérial, entered the Jardin des Plantes, crossed it by the lime-walk to emerge by the principal gate, found themselves in the Rue du Quatre-Septembre which brought them into the Place d'Armes. They paced it from end to end, without missing a stone, paving-stones themselves, with a cadaverous, contemptuous and formidable slowness. From there, they turned the corner of the Basses-Treilles, without a glance at the dolphin and nymph on its fountain, came down to the Port Saint-Gilles by the footpath known as the Petit Bonneveau, and proceeded along the canal bank as far as the Venelle Sainte-Radegonde, which brought them back to the Boulevard du Grand Cerf and to their factory.

On the evening of this Sunday on which Joseph's power of sleep aroused the admiration of the young Lefombère, the two mill-owners made their customary circuit. They

conversed even less than usual, each of them being absorbed in his own gloomy thoughts.

They could not get over the wrench of leaving Buschendorf. These large bodies did not survive transplantation. Accustomed to a routine of work, to familiar scenes and voices, they were paralysed by novelty. The slurred French of the West had the same effect on their ears as an insipid drink on the palate. Everything hurt them, the frivolity of conversation as well as the general spirit of joviality.

But, first and foremost, to men who had always respected the equilibrium of Debit and Credit as the foundation of rectitude, Debt created an atmosphere which they found it impossible to breathe.

When an engineer has finished planning a bridge, and has calculated, to ten decimal places, the resisting strength of each arch, extrados and abutment, he takes his papers, and in the space of a few seconds, multiplies his figures by sixty. They call this their coefficient of safety. This is the allowance that they make for matter and its tricks. It is their sacrifice to the Unknown Gods, and the stroke of the pen which is to transform the minute clockwork of their estimates into a bridge in stone and mortar open to the public.

The Simlers had always multiplied their precautions in this fashion. Until the war came, their budgets worked at long range ; the stock-taking for the year '60 assured a daily security in the year '80. The coefficient was large enough to cover, without undue disturbance, strikes, sickness, fire or death.

But there is one event in the face of which human coefficients become inoperative, for the law by which man is encompassed and the law which he carries within him combine in stultifying them : this event is a removal.

The Simlers had removed. These men had abandoned everything in order to remain citizens of France. (And, we

may say in passing, if they felt every nerve in their bodies smarting with the pain of the operation, they were, thank heaven, too little versed in eloquence to explain the reasons that had impelled them.)

Only they had foreseen everything, except the fact that death is a sort of removal, whereas a removal is a twofold death. To die is nothing, when a man dies where he was born, and hands on to his son what he has received from his father.

A place, be it the most isolated marlpit, or a row of fishermen's huts on a reef of bare rock, contains in itself a certain number of things. These things are gathered round your cradle, at the initial moment, and return to lean over you—at the moment when *you are about to learn.*

These things, they are perhaps the sounds, the scents and lights, that peculiar flavour that is to be found, more or less, in every tiniest corner of the earth ; but there is added to them, in equal measure, what the course of generations has left behind of their chimeras and their tenacity.

It was with this that the Simlers had broken. Since then, everything had been wanting. They were simple-minded enough to be surprised at this.

There was no question, then, of *roots* or of being *uprooted*, in France. And it was better thus, if we admit that in this country many reasonable thoughts, once they have been uttered with a certain air, turn into pernicious ineptitudes. This fortunate circumstance permitted Hippolyte to confide to his brother, that evening, in an artless tone, as they were going down to Port Saint-Gilles : " We are two trees, Myrtil, whose roots have been laid bare."

He accompanied these words with a savage glare at their surroundings, a group of bare-walled houses, crushed down by their flat roofs.

Even the ground beneath their feet was lacking. The Debt had mined it.

" A foul spot," replied Myrtil, screwing up his nose. We must forgive the Simlers their inability to dress up their thoughts in more precision or elegance. They had received only an elementary education. They were animals adapted exclusively to productive toil. In speaking as he did, Myrtil had no desire to insult Vendeuvre. But these barbarians came from a land where civic proper pride is by no means unknown. The well-scoured pavements of Alsace, Protestant diligence, and the ample supply of water from the Vosges had given them a keen sense of smell. The state of neglect in which the West is content to live shocked them. If it be true that small discomforts hurt us more than great catastrophes, they felt their exile more in this than in other signs.

They were beginning however to be something more than merely " the Prussians " and to lift their hats in response to several greetings. But this new trend of public opinion had not yet come to their notice. Hippolyte said : " This place makes me afraid of dying."

" Dying ? "

" It is not an idea that would have occurred to me, at home. What would become, here, of Sarah, of the children, of yourself, Myrtil ? "

These words were uttered without tenderness. Moreover, Hippolyte was merely stating a fact. Myrtil was under no misapprehension as to that. He uttered no protest. He did not waste any time considering the contempt with which Hippolyte seemed to regard his, Myrtil's, own part, in the present and in the future. He was simply astonished at the turn that his brother's thoughts had taken, and said to him : " Dying ? There is no question of anybody's dying."

"There is always the question of that," replied Guillaume's father. Myrtil stole a sidelong glance at his elder brother's imposing figure. He tried to imagine the spot at which death would assail it. He replied, with no humorous intention :

" This is not the moment."

Hippolyte shrugged his shoulders:

" Every moment is the moment. *It* does not await our pleasure. Just when it is most important to you that *it* should not come, that is the moment when *it* does come. Ever since we left Buschendorf, I have been expecting *it* every night. My asthma is growing worse. I cannot believe that business will last. We ought never to touch what was made to last for ever. *It* has begun by taking the things, *it* will go on and take the man."

He lowered his voice, and his throat became slightly choked. But there was nothing in the attitude of either man to reveal the subject of this singular conversation. Myrtil listened, as he always listened when Hippolyte spoke. His gait was no less jerky, his neck no less stiff than on ordinary occasions. He said :

" The boys have put their heart and soul into the work. . . ."

" The boys ? The boys have been the cause of everything I ought to have listened to you. I trusted the women, and those to whom women listen. The boys have acted as though they were acting for themselves. A man ought never to parcel out his own life to right and left while he is alive. There are no two ways of being right about a thing, nor are there two kinds of men who know what ought to be done. We have steered the ship long enough. It was we that knew how. Do not interrupt : business is not going badly, I know that myself. It is going well. But I cannot believe that it will last. Over there, yes. . . . But here ? It is too early. We ought to have waited, waited a long time. Then we might have tried. Myrtil, when I am dead, you won't leave them alone, not for a day, you promise me, Myrtil ? "

He had recovered his thick, imperious voice, interrupted by his asthmatic wheeze. Myrtil, who was following him attentively, was taken off his guard : " There's no need to think of that, Hippolyte . . ."

" Promise ! "

" Wait until the time comes."

" Promise, Myrtil ! "

" But what else should I have to do, until my own death, since we are speaking of death ? Plant cabbages ? Not my style. *Hasch !* There's no need to promise." Then his raucous, piercing voice shook : " And even if I do promise, of what use should I be, without you ? "

" You will be the last person left who knows what we would have done, upon *our own* ground."

" Those are not arguments that appeal to young people."

" I am not thinking of them, but of saving and maintaining as much as possible. Sarah is not strict with her sons . . ."

" Enough. I have promised. But you're not going just yet. And so . . . "

" I may go at any moment. What is there to keep us here, us, the men of Alsace ? Besides, does one ever cease to think about—that affair ? "

Myrtil never thought about it, any more than he thought about many other of the serious obligations of this world. But Hippolyte having spoken, he remained silent.

A lump appeared out of the darkness, gleaming and round like a hunting horn. It was the little merchant Boulinier. He must have been watching them for some time. His surprise at meeting them exploded noisily.

" Well, I never ! This is a stroke of luck. Since when has anyone seen the Messieurs Simler outside their factory ? "

" When it is time for them to leave it," was the grave response.

" Fuut, fuut, you, gentlemen, you never do anything without a reason. I am sure that you are engaged in plotting, calculating, forestalling, observing."

The malice of this speech did not rouse the Alsatians.

" It is certain that chattering for the sake of chattering is a thing that does not appeal to us, Monsieur Boulinier."

A drop of wine had made the little merchant more aggressive and more self-confident than usual.

" Talking of that, gentlemen, explain to me how it is that you, who have piled up a comfortable fortune, over there, in your own country—between ourselves, now, you won't deny the fact, to me—haven't taken the opportunity to invest a bit, or to buy a little land, here or there, and so live in comfort? What is the good of working if one is never to enjoy one's profits? We were talking about this very subject a few moments ago, just among a few friends. And people were asking the question, really, because they don't understand what you are after, and that destroys confidence. So hard at it! What need had you to come and start a new business, when your old business had made you certain at least of comfort, eh? What I say is not meant as criticism. Good customers . . . ahem! . . . such excellent relations of all sorts . . . dear, dear gentlemen, . . . but it damages you, it damages you, fuut, ft!"

The two tall figures listened in silence and sought to unravel the meaning of this speech. Finally :

" Have you any children, sir?"

" I should think so. A girl and a boy, the pair of them fit for a king."

" What does he do, your poy?" was the abrupt retort.

" My ' poy '? Why, he is well provided for. He's a lucky dog, if you like. He has no need to worry about the future, or balance-sheets. He is Receiver of Taxes, thanks to Monsieur de Rauglandre, Receiver of Taxes at Loches, gentlemen, with a guaranteed pension."

" And your zon-in-law?"

" My ' zon-in-law '? Brrouf! Ffuut! He hasn't to worry his head like me, either. A secretary of a sub-prefecture, in a charming town, such as Loudun, is a little king."

" Very well then, Monsieur Poulinier, whether you like it or not, my sons are cloth-weavers, as I myself am, as my brother is, as my father *selig* was, as my grandfather *selig* was, as will be, please God, my grandson and the children of my grandson. My grandfather, Mosche Hertz Simler, was Trum-major to the Young Guard of the Emperor Napoleon. He served in the retreat from Russia, the campaign in France, the war of Waterloo. When he returned home, he had twelve thousand francs saved, and the cross. He founded the first cloth factory there had ever been at Buschendorf. He prospered, by the grace of God, and his son left the factory to us, to my brother Myrtil and myself. I worked there from the age of twelve. My sons were sent to study, all the study that was possible in Buschendorf, and each of them started work in the factory at the age of fifteen. When the war broke out, we possessed one hundred and forty-three thousand francs, Monsieur Poulinier, I give you the figure, you can spread it among your friends. That meant an income of eight thousand livres, upon which to be kings in Buschendorf, as you say. But we find that tedious, to be kings in a small town, Monsieur Poulinier. We do not know how to be kings after that fashion. There is something more than that, in the world, when it is a question of not allowing the business to decline which our fathers have entrusted to us, and of giving a purpose to life. My grandson is taking a complete course of study at the lycée. He will nevertheless be a cloth-weaver, and not a receiver of taxes or a little clerk in an office. He will risk his own fortune every day, and his children's fortune, and your confidence too, it seems. But he will carry on our task, and will make it his own, as we make it ours. And if fortune smiles upon him, well then,—well, we shall see, Sir."

The little merchant was a trifle too intoxicated to take offence : " Then, you fear nothing ? "

" Nothing, Sir."

" Not the risk, nor . . . ? Supposing war breaks out again, and . . . You would begin all over again ? "

" Over again, Sir. It would be the second time, merely."

" *Fichtre !* Ah, well," he concluded with a coarse laugh, " when I come across stalwarts of your sort, gentlemen, saving your reverence, I prefer to know that my children are in government service. I must go and tell all this to . . . to my friends. Your servant, gentlemen, a pleasant walk, every happiness. *Fichtre*, brroum, fuut."

No sooner had the trumpeting little fellow moved away than Hippolyte uttered, in an undertone, one of those terrifying indigenous formulas, the effect of which is that the man from whom the speaker has just parted is brought back, judged, and condemned for ever.

Not that Mons. Boulinier had any ground for complaint. The Simlers would have yielded up their last drop of blood sooner than fail to meet his demands punctually, to the last cent. Was it not already being whispered that, in their mutual accounts, it was he who was beginning to appear as debtor to the *Nouveaux Etablissements Simler*, for a sum that ran into many figures ?

As for reproaching Hippolyte with his emphatic outburst, and the regal assurance with which he had just contradicted himself, only Myrtil could have dreamed of doing that. And he was likely to do so !

After the Port Saint-Gilles, over which towered the broad bellies of the lighters, came the Venelle Sainte-Radegonde, then the dark funnel of the Boulevard du Grand Cerf. Few shops. Walls of factories, and muffled street corners. Not a soul. The breeze swept down the avenue as down an organ pipe.

The two weavers walked with bowed shoulders, keeping hold of their hats ; the legs of their trousers floated before them like naval pennons, and tugged at their calves.

" Eh ? " said Myrtil suddenly. A darker stain was spreading over the nocturnal darkness. It must originate halfway up a building whose presence they could guess, from force of habit.

They continued to advance, for a few paces. An acrid odour was swept over them in an eddy of the wind, like a distant rumble ; hot soot, and those subtle ethers that are generated in the destruction of things.

The building was a small structure which served as stable and loft to the Lefombère factory. It abutted on the store in which oil and dyes were kept. The groom was doubtless taking a Sunday holiday, somewhere in the town.

The two men stood still, shoulder to shoulder, without breathing, gazing and listening, but to their own hearts rather than to anything outside.

A hundred yards away, a shop was closing. Its light was extinguished amid the clatter of the last shutter. They were alone. The smoke was thickening in a leisurely fashion. The gusts of wind wreathed it and carried it away, howling.

Then, without having said anything, they began to walk on and returned home, with no quickening of their pace, but without exchanging a word.

Sarah and Hermine were sewing in the lamplight. Aunt Babette was nodding over a book. Seated in the shadow, the clubfoot was dreaming, with bent head, by the lighted stove. Guillaume came and went, tugging his moustaches.

Sarah laid down her work and gazed at her husband with her sombre, tranquil eyes. Hermine sighed. Babette awoke. Blum did not stir. The two weavers sat down with a frigid air which discouraged the silence even.

They did not notice this. Their thoughts had remained outside. In the warm room they found it impossible to breathe. Hippolyte rose first, and went out. Myrtil followed him. In the courtyard, where the gale was shrieking, they examined the dark mass of their factory. Its form, its

presence, its weight, its existence reassured them. But a gust of wind enveloped them in a pungent aroma as to which there could be no mistake. Now, the Lefombère buildings were at least two hundred yards away. The fire was gaining strength.

They turned face to face. The night was as dark as the bottom of a pit. Nevertheless, it is no exaggeration to say that they saw each other's face, and saw that it was as white as pipe-clay.

"Myrtil," moaned the old patriarch.

"Yes, yes, Hippolyte," murmured his brother. The tempest increased its violence. They had still the strength to turn indoors, to sit down in the lamplight, amid their family circle, and to listen to the idle remarks that were being exchanged.

A clock sounded half-past ten, a sharp stroke, that vanished as soon as it was formed, irretrievable. Hippolyte raised his head, cast his eyes round him, and went out a second time, abruptly. Myrtil at first dared not follow him.

The iron door banged. The weaver walked up the boulevard as fast as the wind allowed him. A crackling sound warned him to raise his head. Showers of sparks, escaping through the airholes in the shutters, shows that the loft had caught. The organ pipe of the boulevard was no longer the only thing that roared and rumbled.

Hippolyte heard a step rapidly overtaking him. He looked once again at the stable. It was beginning to light up inside, like a skull in which a candle is burning. He went on, past fifty yards of wall, came to an iron gate, and halted for a moment. The footstep was no longer audible. Not that it could have been anyone else than Myrtil.

He put out his hand, groped, found the handle of a bell, and again halted. Finally, he pulled it. A harsh, jangling peal began to dance, rending apart something incredibly inert and opaque. The rectangle of a window was lighted in the Lefombère mansion. A door was unbarred. A man in a

dressing gown, his throat wrapped in a yellow silk muffler, appeared on the threshold ; his hand was sheltering the flame of a candle and threw back its light upon his face.

" Who is there ? "

" Come at once," cried Hippolyte Simler, " come, Monsieur Lefombère, your factory is on fire ! "

XIV

" Don't go back, M'sieur Joseph."

" Ah ! Whatever's left inside will have to burn, no one can save it."

" Hong-kong, Hong-kong," groans the pump, in the hands of the municipal fire brigade.

" Keep back there."

" Why, just look at M'sieur Lorilleux, the old man, there, in his fur coat."

" What can you expect with a wind like this ? It caught like a wisp of straw."

" Have the horses been saved ? "

" . . . Simler who gave the alarm."

" The people I'm sorry for are those poor Bernuchons."

" Their house was built into the wall, as you might say, and now not one stone left standing on another."

" Come along now, get back there."

The silver-braided cap of authority manœuvres vainly amid the crowd.

" Hong-kong, Hong-kong . . . "

" And that unfortunate Monsieur Hector coming off the Paris train and knowing nothing about it."

" The poor Bernuchons, people that wouldn't harm a flea, with the father lying helpless."

" Who is that stout fellow, all black, wait now, if you stand on tiptoe can't you see him ? "

" What, don't you know him ? That's young Simler, the P.— I mean the Alsatian's second son, Monsieur Joseph, to be precise. Why, I was just going to tell you, he was coming back on the train with M'sieur Hector. At Les Ormes station some one called out to them : ' Your place is on fire,' and off the train went before they could find out which, and so, you see, they had to come all the way from Les Ormes asking themselves which of their places it was that was burning."

" That stout man in the oilskins ? "

" Yes, they're for the water, not the fire. That's the fourth time he has gone in. He has saved old Bernuchon and two horses. But as I was telling you. Out they get at the station . . . "

" Will you keep back there, do you hear me ? "

" I say, Tinus, you're being very important to-night. Come and have a drop of something at the P'tit Goret, better than bawling in the street at this time of night ! "

" Keep your mouth shut, won't you ? Here's M'sieur Lefombère coming."

" That great skeleton there, the owner ? Poor man ! To have to watch his place burning."

" Hong-kong, Hong-kong, Hong-kong . . . "

" As I was telling you, they come running down from the station, see what has happened, and then Simler whips off his coat and dashes into the fire, in the hottest part ! "

" They're fine fellows, after all."

" Old Bernuchon is a cripple, isn't he ? "

" Does anyone know how it started ? "

" The night-watchman, they say ; he fell asleep in the hay with his lantern."

" Think of that, now ! "

" Didn't he rescue the watchman too, young M'sieur Simler ? "

" Yes, he fell from the hayloft as soon as the fire woke

him, but he was lying on the stable floor with a sprained ankle."

"And how many times has he gone back?"

"Four. There, do you hear that?"

"Don't go back again, M'sieur Simler; you've done quite enough."

"You can't do any more."

"No use courting death."

"There's nothing left but wood and wool, it will have to burn, don't try to save it."

But Joseph, his moustaches scorched to the roots, his eyelids charred and black, engulfed in a duck-shooter's oilskins, his head protected by two damp towels upon which the fire has traced continents with red frontier-lines, is struggling amid a group of men.

"Stay here, I beg of you, Monsieur Simler," says the drawling, distinguished voice of M. Yves Lefombère, "there is nothing more to be got out."

"But your books, your books!" cries Joseph. "Have you got your books? You're not going to allow your books to perish?"

His sweat, tracing rivulets through the soot, marks his face with apparent cracks of a bright red.

The stable is nothing more now than a ditch full of black mud over which a charred roof-beam straddles. Two mounds of rubbish, from which steam is spitting, indicate the site of the warehouse, and, farther off, that of the Bernuchons' house. The main building is now ablaze. The firemen and a squad of infantry, in their gym-fatigue dress, are endeavouring to isolate the fire. The sound of axes echoes from the timber.

The crowd has gradually invaded the courtyard. It mutters, wavers, and at times gives vent to a loud confused cry when a burst of flame illumines the sea of faces anxiously gazing at the calamity.

" Chain, form a chain ! "

" Then the pump isn't working any longer ? "

" I thought so."

" Here, you can talk about it to-morrow. Get a move on, d'you hear ? "

" Seems it's spreading below the floor of the spinning-mill."

" Hi ! Make way there, will you. Chain ! "

" Hong-kong, Hong-kong . . . "

" Well, Captain ? "

" Well, my poor Lefombère, and Madame ? "

" I've sent her home with my daughters, since you assure me that the house . . . "

" No danger in that direction. But tell me, ahem, are you insured ? "

" Yes."

" Ah ! That takes a load off my mind. But, ahem, is it known, do you know how, ahem, the fire . . . "

" My dear Captain, I know nothing, nothing, nothing," replies M. Lefombère at the top of his voice. " I was insured, but my business was going well, and I authorise you to make it publicly known that it was not I who set . . . "

" Come, come, my dear Sir, what are you thinking of? Who would ever dream . . . ? "

" Poor Lefombère is in a dreadful state of nerves," the Captain confides to M. Lorilleux.

" All the more so as he is controlling himself. Look at him. There's no doubt about it."

" Hong-kong, Hong-kong . . . "

" What a disaster, too ! "

" Tell me, Captain, do they still think that it was the watchman ? "

" How should I know ? The hay was damp and slightly fermented. The fire must have been smouldering for some time. The watchman should be in prison. If we'd been

warned half an hour earlier, a couple of buckets would have put it out."

A movement on M. Lorilleux's part makes the Captain turn. Within a few feet of him, and gazing at him, stands a tall figure whose bulk and immobility suggest a hallucination. Anguish, contempt and provocation occupy the centre of the face. The reflection of the fire glows ruddily upon the convexity of a pair of bloodshot eyes forcibly embedded in the furrows of the surrounding flesh.

The Captain gives a somewhat stiff salute. M. Hippolyte begins to move, and, without acknowledging the salute, without ceasing to hold the officer with his gaze, passes, followed by his brother, no less impenetrable. The crowd part before them with a sort of respect.

" Ugly brute," murmurs the Captain.

" Yes, yes," replies M. Lorilleux without conviction : " but a pair of devilish strong men."

At this moment, Joseph emerges for the fifth time from the blazing factory. The water with which he was drenched, before going in, steams from his shoulders. He is carrying without stooping five huge ledgers, the charred corners of which hiss and crumble.

Everyone dashes towards him. His oilskins and towels are torn off. Nothing is visible at first but a skull. Those who are nearest to him think that he is burned to the bone. There are some who run away shrieking. M. Hippolyte arrives just in time to hear : " Poor Monsieur Joseph Simler ! Oh ! "

And, the crowd having parted, he makes out a crouching, blackened creature who is protecting his face with both hands. Although he is still at some distance, the glow of the fire throws a light on those hands, which he knows to be plump ; they are charred, desiccated, as though they had been steeped in iodine.

At the same moment a tall form crosses the empty space,

jumping over the puddles and the piles of rubbish ; it is Hector Lefombère : " Simler ! My dear fellow, my . . . friend ! "

But there is nothing to equal the growl that comes from M. Hippolyte nor the pace that he imparts to his gouty legs. Everyone makes way for him.

Joseph removes his hands from his face and holds them out, while he attempts to smile. His face is visible, a motley of coppery eruptions and patches of soot.

Then catching sight of his father, feeling Hector Lefombère's hand gripping his own, seeing converge upon him M. Lefombère, the Captain, and the black coats of the officials, he can think only of how he is to escape from any sort of effusion, by any manner of means.

It is remarkable that, loyal by instinct to a sort of coarse symbolism, industry has allotted to the summons to work the most despairing appeal that it has been able to find.

The siren of the Etablissements Simler did not indicate to the stragglers, on the Monday morning that followed, the shutting of the gates with an authority any less inexorable or more arrogant than on ordinary mornings.

The oil lamps were lighted above the lines of machines. They did not make the November morning any less dreary or cold. Guillaume was at his post, by the door, Hippolyte in the weaving-room, Myrtil in the spinning-mill.

There was nothing altered, in Vendeuvre, save one wailing siren the less, and three hundred workers who, awakened by force of habit, were asking themselves where they were to procure, on that day and the days to come, their daily bread.

However, about ten o'clock, a servant brought M. Hippolyte a voluminous budget, fastened with four metal clips and a large seal of brown wax. A letter accompanied it. M. Hippolyte was strolling among the looms, escorted by Zeller,

and was displaying the most execrable temper that his workers had ever seen. He took the letter, stared for some time at the hat and livery of the bearer, twisted the envelope in his hands and finally shut himself up in his glazed office.

SIR,

You must kindly excuse me if I do not devote much time to the expressions which gratitude enjoins, and if I do not bring you proof of it in person.

My presence is indispensable this morning among the ruins of what was, yesterday, my factory.

But for your assistance, and the courage of one of your family, the disaster would have been complete.

I should be unworthy of the warning that has been sent me, did I not retain for all time to come, as one of the most precious treasures which Divine Providence has left to me, the sense of the obligations which I have contracted towards yourself.

The force of circumstances compels me, however, to beg you to render me, here and now, a second service of the utmost importance to myself.

Work is at a standstill, here, for a period the length of which I cannot estimate. Nor does anything remain of seven hundred pieces of cloth ready for delivery. My customers' orders cannot all be subjected to a delay that must probably exceed a year.

In these conditions, I should regard myself as bound to you by a fresh bond of gratitude, if you would consent, within the limits (of which I know nothing) of the materials and machinery at your disposal, to substitute yourself for me, entirely, without any condition or engagement of any sort on your part, in the execution of the orders left in default by last night's disaster.

I take the liberty, in order that you may be able to reply with knowledge of the facts, of sending you with this letter a detailed list of these orders with the cards of samples selected and other

information as complete as it has been possible for us to make them, this morning, from the books rescued by your son.

I need scarcely say that in the event of your agreeing, I undertake to obtain the consent of my customers. I am aware of the irreproachable quality of your output.

Finally . . .

" Monsieur Myrtil ! Go and fetch me Monsieur Myrtil ! "

The windows rattle as the door bangs.

The brothers remained for a long time stooping over the paper covered with M. Lefombère's weary but distinguished script. They exchanged several glances and shook their heads. This at least was all that the messenger was able to report.

Guillaume, then Joseph swathed in bandages (his injuries were not serious), came and joined them. Vehement gestures were observed, and the silence of M. Hippolyte, who listened to each of them in turn without moving his head, assembling them all in his large field of vision. Zeller had his hands full, keeping the women's attention on their work.

In the middle of this deliberation, two men made their way into the clamour of the weaving-room, with the same precautions as though they had been entering a drawing-room during a religious meeting. One of them, a midget of a man smothered in a grey muffler, dropped a few words into Zeller's ear. The other, upon whom a Boniface obesity ought to have conferred authority, confined himself to resting each of his many chins upon the edge of his collar, raising his eyebrows like a man who has slept too soundly.

Zeller ventured into the office. His four employers turned. An unfinished sentence remained suspended from Guillaume's jaw, which it threatened to dislocate.

But the midget and the thread merchant, finding the door open, had wormed their way into the room. The muffler

bowed to the ground and explained, unfolding a large sheet of paper, that he came on behalf of the Bernuchon committee, which . . .

" Give it here," M. Hippolyte cut him short. He took the paper. His brother and sons looked over his shoulder. Zeller remained in the room, to see what would happen next.

The whole of Vendeuvre figured already in the list. The subscriptions ranged from forty sous to eighty francs. The eighty francs were given by the Mayor, who had promised a hundred more from the Council, the muffler explained. M. de Rauglandre was responsible for a louis, M. des Challeries for an écu, M. Boulinier, who expected great credit for his generosity, for a magnificent ten-franc piece. They would be satisfied with the humblest copper, the muffler explained, only too thankful that he had not been shown the door ; he was finishing his first round with the Simlers, and was not over-confident.

M. Hippolyte said not a word, but cast sidelong glances, to right and left, as though to communicate his decision to the frock-coats round about him. He put his hand upon a pen-holder, which it engulfed, then with an angular nib which crossed, quavered, and spat ink, he wrote :

" Nouveaux Etablissements Simler, 2000 francs."

Guillaume drew himself up. Joseph made a grimace of satisfaction beneath his bandages. Myrtil said nothing, but heaved a deep sigh, and his eyes withdrew within the shells of his brows like the horns of a snail.

" There, Sir ! The money will be paid to you to-day, between two and four o'clock."

The Boniface did not think of casting his eye over the list until he noticed the confusion of the midget. One might have expected a liver attack in the little man, a heart attack in the big. They had to be shown the door. Even then they left a long track of verbose humility between the glazed office and the courtyard, where they bowed to the factory,

the house, the scales, the paving-stones, the gate, and a bay horse tied to a ring.

The next half-hour passed in a scrutiny of the documents that had been sent with the letter. Voices were lowered. The stroke of the two thousand francs had created a feeling of awkwardness.

Nevertheless, when Guillaume left the office in quest of some information in his own lair, Zeller could hear his master's thick voice saying, in a tone from which a sort of anger was not lacking : " He ought to have known all the same that he was selling at ten per cent. more than we, and that his customers will stick to us ! "

When Guillaume returned, Myrtil, bowed over Lefombère's lists, was saying : " Half of it is priests' and officers' cloth. We shall have to buy two looms too for billiard cloth."

However, the following letter was weighed and composed, word by word. These people were more awkward in words than in action.

> Monsieur Lefombère,
> Sir,
>
> We are extremely obliged to you for the sentiments expressed in your esteemed letter of the 21st instant, and express all our hopes that the damage which you have suffered in consequence of last night's fire may be speedily repaired.
>
> We have given full consideration to the proposals embodied in your esteemed letter. We need hardly say that we place our establishment at your disposal within the limit of our means, if it appears to you that we can facilitate to the slightest extent the settlement of the difficulties which you are temporarily undergoing. This offer is, moreover, in our eyes, merely the natural consequence of our position as neighbours, and of the relations of mutual assistance which are its necessary consequence.
>
> Nevertheless, after examining the proposals which

you have been so kind as to make to us, they have seemed to us to be inacceptable, inasmuch as they transform the temporary support which we may be able to give you into a direct service which we should be receiving from you, without any apparent reason.

In consequence, we have the honour to submit to you the following proposal : the orders enumerated in the documents which you have submitted to us shall be entirely executed and delivered by our personal means, in conformity with the lists of prices which you have submitted to us ; and we shall take a half share in the profit ensuing from this work, a profit calculated upon the basis of a selling price the detailed estimate of which will be submitted to you by us within forty-eight hours.

If this arrangement suits you, we are ready to carry it into effect as soon as you have let us know and we have agreed as to details.

Believe me, Sir, etc.,

HIPPOLYTE SIMLER.

Guillaume held the pen, M. Hippolyte signed. The letter was carried there and then by Zeller to Lefombère, in whom it created a considerable astonishment.

Hector hurried to the Simlers' ; he spent the afternoon in the warehouse, closeted with Joseph, and parted from him with tears and embraces.

For forty-eight hours the Simlers did not rise from their calculations. The result of this toil was that they took on half of Lefombère's hands, and that Guillaume went off to purchase fifteen new Mercier looms. Myrtil had to get spinning done outside. Sabouret *fils*, with whom things were not going famously, accepted the order. Unaware of the arrangement that Lefombère had made with the Simlers, he did not know what to think of such activity.

M. Hippolyte had been a true prophet. Lefombère engaged upon a lawsuit with the insurance company and rebuilt

his factory slowly. His customers remained with the Simlers who would not have needed these events in order to realise a handsome figure, but made, that year, a turnover of fifteen hundred thousand francs, and a profit of thirty-five thousand.

XV

The destruction of two-thirds of the Lefombère factory had stirred Vendeuvre. But the Simlers' hundred louis had burst upon the town like a clap of thunder.

Fire was included in the category of current risks. Neither the long-established credit of the Lefombères nor the existence of Vendeuvre was gravely affected by it. The sum subscribed by the Alsatians introduced a novel situation and raised a definite question.

" Those men are devilish strong," public opinion repeated, with a blend of bitterness and admiration. Public opinion thus endorsed the remark made by M. Lorilleux to the infantry captain in command of the fire picket.

Was it sound? The barbed silence of M. Hippolyte during the weeks that followed the disaster—in any other man you would have called it grief—seemed serious enough to Sarah. And the way in which Myrtil in imitation kept his own lips sealed did not seem to her any more intelligible.

" What is it that is worrying them? " she said one day to Hermine. However, the balance-sheet for 1873 dispelled the last traces of this mysterious bitterness.

Was it vanity? Or generosity?

Vendeuvre was incapable of solving so complicated a problem. But the Simlers—strong men as they were—could they have solved it themselves?

They did not give it a thought. Barely conscious of the stir that they had made, they continued to live, apparently along a straight line, and advanced, with an irresistible

force, towards a future which they believed that they and they alone could foresee.

The ladies Lefombère came to pay a call upon Mme. Hippolyte. This was a most ceremonial occasion. But the overture, which began with somewhat forced effusions, ended in a distinct failure on account of the awkwardness of the Mesdames Lefombère and of Sarah's icy dignity. Hermine contributed as her share a silent discomfort, and the little parlour its stuffiness.

Nevertheless, this call suggested to Sarah and her daughter-in-law that it might be expedient to go and thank Mlle. Le Pleynier for the kitten.

We must make haste to explain that this idea did not occur to them spontaneously. After two Sundays devoted to healing his burns and to playing the flute to Hector, followed by a third which was imperiously due to Cora, Joseph felt such a conflict of sentiments in his own heart that he took his friend Justin's hand in his own and set off into the country.

Frosty December weather made walking good and the road firm. They started out without any ostensible goal but went by the Nantes gate.

The gate of Le Plantis stood open. There was no sign of life beyond it. Justin grinned at his uncle. His malice went unrewarded. Joseph did not hesitate.

Near La Buchellerie, a side road enticed them away. Three hundred yards farther on, and they were steering through the heart of a wood, leafless at this season, but dense and green.

"We must come back here next summer," said Joseph. Justin made no reply. He was already making plans to return there before Christmas. They were treading upon a crackling floor of withered leaves. Periwinkles and violets, violets of enormous size, appeared and vanished. Brooms still in blossom focused upon themselves the light that

filtered through the undergrowth, and, with the help of the pale autumn sun, succeeded in forming dazzling clusters.

A scent of new bread crept to their nostrils. The nature of the wood began to change. The tree-trunks drew apart, but this was to leave a pine-tree the space that it requires. The ground was now covered with a fine, green grass, which recalled the patient toil of mediæval illuminators. The scurrying of blackbirds shattered the silence of the lower branches. Little birds flew away in multitudes.

Flakes of ice, caught among the pine needles, took the place now, under foot, of the crackling of withered leaves. Coarse, friendly scents ran along the ground. Others came down from the pine-bough ceiling, transforming the sunlight into perfume, as the broom transformed it into colour.

Justin gave a shout. A strawberry, which had escaped the frost, made a spot of blood at the root of an ivy. Never had he felt man so remote.

But a glimmer among the tree-trunks indicated a clearing. Bordered by a hawthorn hedge interspersed with gorse, the wood came to a halt on the edge of a patch of sandy soil, at the farther end of which a man in moleskin corduroys was working.

The road went on. Two lines of tall pines detached themselves simultaneously from the wood to escort it. Their trunks were twisted out of shape by the west wind. They rose only by a series of spiral twists and curves. They glowed with an extraordinary glazed redness which seemed not so much to be laid upon them as to be emerging from them.

Thus enframed, the road described a long curve, to end at a brown gate. Joseph laid his hand upon the latch which opened of its own accord, as though it had merely been awaiting this invitation.

A marvellous lawn descended, gradually widening,

between shrubberies of bay-laurels, Corsican pines and umbrella pines. The morning light shone straight upon it, and rested upon it as lightly as a bird poised on a hazel-bough. An astonishing mystery emanated from this grass, these thickets, this silence.

At the farther end of the lawn was a house with brown shutters. A line of rose-bushes, in their winter trim, screened its foundations. A flight of moss-grown steps led to the ground floor.

The slope continued on either side of the house, and ended, a few yards beyond it, in a dense thicket of trees of every sort. Beyond this coppice, the tops of a line of poplars marked the end of the valley, spoke of watermeads and the coolness of running streams. They could hear the rivulet purling among the reeds of a small hatch. Beyond, a chalky cliff rose in shadow for a hundred feet, behind a breastplate of box and evergreen oak.

A sullen roar grew louder. A train was climbing the hill from Vendeuvre. The panting of the engine sounded so close that Justin stood on tiptoe to watch the smoke rising above the trees. The sound was suddenly swallowed up. The train had entered the tunnel.

No sensation was ever equal, in Joseph's mind, to the happiness of that minute. He felt that his destiny would remain incomplete so long as he had not united in it the vigour of rest with the vigour of work. He discovered that the land was as indispensable to his nature as water, air and wool. He realised that his existence might become his own personal task, and that it had been until then merely the blind product of his environment and of circumstances.

He thought of his Uncle Blum. He thought of Cora and asked himself what place that connection occupied in his life. He thought of Hermine, and blushed at the association of her with the other. He saw the wide sloping meadows of Le Plantis, the indolent and too familiar form of Hector

Lefombère, the determination to produce and to acquire which stiffened the form of his father. He heard the sound of his brother's harsh, abrupt voice, the imposing nasal tones of M. Le Pleynier—and Hélène, in her turn, appeared before him.

An indulgent, mocking, grave, slightly controlled voice said : " This is where I must live, or I shall never live at all," and Joseph became aware, as though it were quite natural, that the voice had expressed the very essence of his own sentiment.

The joy of a young animal possessed Justin. He scampered, burrowed, unearthed, plunged, climbed, emerged from the thickets, feet first and with a crimson face, barked to startle the blackbirds whose yellow beaks starred the gloom. His hair had become a green meadow, his knees two earthy mounds.

Joseph gazed round him. His present surroundings included all the substance necessary to life. To what purpose go beyond this large sufficiency in which already happiness was swelling to bursting-point ?

There was not, here, even the slightly solemn planning of Le Plantis. Everything was made exactly to his measure. It had precisely the extent that might be covered, with due development, by his middle-class habits which luxury alarmed no less than poverty.

Meanwhile Justin had discovered a gap in the fence which opened upon the patch of sandy soil. The man in moleskins was quite near, scratching the soil and rubbing his hands together.

Joseph overtook his nephew. The man turned towards them the face of an old friend in which a pair of eyes gleamed with complicity. He was old, his skin clean and rosy.

The preliminaries did not disturb him. Just as Joseph had always known these pines, this grass, that house, and

this winter morning, so the man seemed to feel no doubt that he had always known the two strangers.

" Fine day. You've come on a visit ? "

" No, just for a walk. We had never been this way before."

" Oh ? It's not a bad spot."

" Indeed, no," the uncle hastened to reply, enchanted to receive this endorsement.

" I wish we could say as much of the soil."

" It's not good, the soil ? "

" You might say it's nothing but sand. But it's not bad for the vegetables."

" They belong to you, these fields ? "

" No, no. Never. I'm only the tenant."

He studied his questioner with a sagacious eye. " You've come on a visit ? "

" No. To visit what ? "

" Oh ! You've not come on a visit ? " the old man went on, with an extraordinary merriment in his eye.

" The house is for sale ? " inquired Joseph, without noticing that his heart had almost stopped beating.

" It is for sale. But, if you buy it, it won't be for sale any longer."

" Ah ! " said Joseph gravely. " And what might they be asking for it ? "

The old man's eyes seemed no longer big enough to contain all the slyness that filled them.

" Bound to be a lot more than I can afford, and a lot less than you can spare."

Joseph began to laugh : " Don't be too sure. We must find out. Do you know the price ? "

" Maît' Bénin, the lawyer, will tell you better than I can. There's plenty of ground up there ! Would you like to look at it ? "

He looked at Justin, as he uttered these words, as though

addressing the more rational of the pair. He was playing with them, with an eye to business, of course, but for his own amusement first and foremost.

When they had shut the front door behind them, carrying away in their nostrils that unique odour of spices, silence and intimacy which impregnates old cupboards and empty houses, Joseph and Justin could contain themselves no longer.

" You want to buy it, don't you, Uncle Jos ? Do you suppose Grandpapa will agree ? It would be ripping, wouldn't it ! Look at that path ! Oh ! "

He sped away. Joseph reflected : six rooms, a big kitchen, two dark closets, cellar and attic, seven and a half acres of meadow, sand and wood. Given this setting, he was scarcely astonished to imagine his life installed in it, without any further formality.

He had extracted the price from the old man : Maître Bénin spoke of twelve thousand francs, which might be taken to mean seven or eight thousand. For six years now Passe-Lourdin had been for sale, and the old man was growing bored with having no one with whom he could gossip. He did not conceal the fact that, so far as keeping up the garden went . . . not to mention the vegetables that he grew, and his rabbits, and his wife to do the washing. . . . He rented the patch of sand for a hundred and fifty francs, and made his livelihood from it.

He pointed out, jingling the keys in his hand, a path which led by the low way to Vendeuvre, crossing the Auxance just below M. Le Pleynier's property. And he dismissed them with a wave of his hand instinct with nobility.

Joseph left him with a humming in his ears. Justin, had he been a dog, would have shot out a yard of tongue.

" Shall we come back with Laure, I say ? Shall we come back this afternoon ? "

It was eleven o'clock. They walked along the meadows and brushed through the stiff frozen grass for a long way before they came to the boundary stone which marked the limit of the lands of Passe-Lourdin.

"We should have a boat, eh? Oh, stunning! A boat, Uncle Jos!"

What was fated to happen happened. Hilaire was under the wooden bridge, and was watering a pair of horses, one of them the half-blood which reminded Joseph of the unfortunate incident of the brake.

The servant raised towards the wayfarers a face radiant with pleasure ("Curious, how pleased people seem to be to see me, to-day!" thought Joseph) and bade them, without ceremony, go up to the house. Monsieur was at his writing, Mademoiselle at her music; they would not be disturbing them.

Twenty years spent in their society had failed to persuade Hilaire that the one desire of a man who is engaged in writing or of a woman who is seated at her piano is not that something or other may occur that will call them away from their task.

XVI

For once in a way, however, he was right. And if M. Le Pleynier had not considered it natural that everybody should like the things of which he himself approved, he would have been astonished at the promptitude with which his daughter laid aside everything else to receive his visitors.

Seeing which way the wind blew, Justin allowed himself to be patted on both cheeks, but spoke of Passe-Lourdin before he mentioned the kitten.

An hour later, Joseph and he were still there, chattering away without the least thought of the inconvenience of the

hour. The uneasy expression of Francine, Hilaire's wife, had not disturbed them, even when she had made her third appearance at the drawing-room door.

Finally Hélène rose, left the room, and, returning a moment later, said, with a smile at the solemn air which her father was beginning to assume, his eye fastened on the clock : " That's all settled. You will stay to luncheon."

Uncle and nephew rose in confusion. But their protests were of no avail. M. Le Pleynier, in a contemptuous nasal drawl, said : " Where do you propose to go at this time of day? It is half-past twelve ! "

Joseph was obliged to admit this, with stupefaction. M. Le Pleynier took Justin's head under his arm, and carried him off to the table, while a glance from Hélène made—despite them both—the excuses die away on Joseph's lips.

Delighted with a solution which brought amusement within the range of his habits, M. Le Pleynier displayed a charming good-humour. And for all that Sarah was an excellent cook, there was a certain method of serving hard boiled eggs, filled (although there was no perceptible hole) with chopped greenstuff, in a cream sauce, with just the right dose of condiment, which surprised Justin. The stuffed bream from the Auxance taught him something more in their turn. A rustic mess, judiciously seasoned, of wood-mushrooms and tomatoes left his palate in a condition to welcome, as the earth welcomes summer after spring, a fill of beef, long steeped in a choice Anjou wine and in many other substances as well. As for the island of chocolate, entirely surrounded, according to the definition of the word island, by a cold sea of vanilla cream, he was obliged to declare that it screwed his courage to the sticking point, and was unable to come back for a fourth helping. M. Le Pleynier crowned the whole achievement by saturating him with an old pre-Empire Beaune, in defiance of his daughter, making him tell the dullest stories imaginable.

Joseph did not make the mistake of pretending not to be hungry, but managed to listen as well as to eat.

He had mentioned Passe-Lourdin. "I know it, it is a charming place," said Hélène with animation. Joseph blushed. M. Le Pleynier pronounced judgment: "You ought to buy it."

"Buy it? I should have no objection. . . . But it is a serious question."

"In what respect?" said the other in a hectoring tone. "You aren't thinking of clearing out of the place to-morrow? You are here for some time, I imagine? The mistake you have always made, you Jews, is not establishing yourselves in a place with the idea of remaining there, and starting off by buying land. Once you have a scrap of ground and a hut of your own, people will be only too anxious to take off their hats to you and to sell you their manure at top prices as a preliminary to returning you to Parliament at the head of the poll."

"Whose fault is that?" replied Joseph, who felt the force of the argument.

"I didn't say so, I didn't say so. Race! That thing which nobody can define and for the sake of which we kill one another. The librarian at Vendeuvre has written some quite remarkable works upon the theories of Monsieur de Gobineau. He maintains that he can tell an Aryan by a mere glance at his facial angle, and proposes an Act of Parliament to banish every other race. And yet, my dear Sir, his wife has, saving your presence, the most pronounced Israelite beak that you could dream of.

"Very well, then, furnish your proofs, on your side. People feel that you are always ready to leave the place. Buy Passe-Lourdin, you will set our minds at rest. And this big fellow here," said the old man, tapping Justin's cropped and heated cranium with the flat of his fingers, "make him into a 'gentleman farmer.'" (He pronounced the last words

with an atrocious French accent, and insisted that he made himself better understood by the English than when he dislocated his jaw in trying to imitate their music.)

Justin had arrived at that degree of congestion when the future weighs upon us less than the past, and the past less than the present. He smiled a fatuous smile. M. Le Pleynier leaned across to examine his young neighbour's glass and saw that it was empty. He heaped reproaches upon Hilaire which plunged that faithful servant in a silent mirth.

" That joke is in bad taste," observed Hélène, in the hope of saving Justin. But M. Le Pleynier had got going, and Joseph was up in the clouds. The latter began, however, to realise, as time went on, that the meal was in no way improvised. He said so. Hélène began to laugh, with that laughter which was a conversation and a refreshment.

" When Francine saw you come to the house, as late as that, it was not very difficult for her to guess that we would keep you for luncheon. I only went down to give her the pleasure of seeing my surprise."

Joseph felt himself caught, once again, in the web of an accumulation of customs singularly close, alert and cunning.

" The machine runs smoothly," he said, making an awkward attempt to bow.

" Don't envy us. It is all that we have left. Let this at least be done well."

" All ? Oh ! . . . Oh, Mademoiselle ! " exclaimed the Alsatian from the bottom of his heart, gazing at her.

" For God's sake, he's not going to begin again," Hélène said to herself ; " if he does, I shall lose my head. And never, O Wingless Victory, have you needed it more."

All the more need of it inasmuch as the adversary had entirely lost his. This adversary even took advantage of the fact that M. Le Pleynier was making a great deal of noise with Justin, to venture upon sundry remarks of little logical sequence, but of great intrinsic clarity, upon what would

So

at a later date, have been called the nature of his soul. He began indeed to flounder miserably enough through that quagmire, which neither cloth-weavers nor professional psychologists had as yet explored. And it distressed him to observe that Hélène replied only by a series of evasive nods.

Joseph then remembered the nickname given to Mlle. Le Pleynier. And this gave rise in him to various mutually contradictory resolutions.

The fact remains that, when they had risen from table, and were taking coffee in the drawing-room which had alarmed him so on his first visit, the joints of his right fingers cracked against the palm of his left hand, and, with a twitch of his ears which dislodged his spectacles, he approached Hélène. She had already begun to prepare a little isolated bastion, with Justin by her side.

" We disturbed you when we called. Would you be so kind as to give us a little . . . music ? "

She looked him coldly in the face.

" We know how to listen," he added with a humble, submissive air.

" What am I going to play for *him* ? " she asked herself as she turned her eyes away. " To what music will he *know how* to listen ? "

She went across to a bookcase, drew out a well worn volume bound in red cloth, sat down, gathering her brown skirt under her, and opened the book with a fierce gesture.

A storm broke out suddenly beneath her fingers. She had begun to play the Waldstein Sonata.

Joseph had never heard a woman at the piano, save when his mother played German waltzes upon a little instrument of five octaves, with an old fashioned courtesy and gentleness.

Hélène's brutal attack shocked him. Her playing, like her handwriting, was devoid of those glissandos, those rallentissimos, those die-away pianissimos which make the

music of young ladies resemble a graceful ride upon a swing.

She played boldly, with an almost metaphysical firmness. Her fingers had a virile touch, accentuated that day by the state of her nerves. Her eyebrows were arched, her nostrils dilated, her lips quivered.

M. Le Pleynier slipped quietly from the room to take his nap.

It was barely a moment before the storm filled the vast body of the grand piano. It groaned and writhed in torment. Ever and again, a flash of lightning rent the sky. A peal of thunder answered it, then a rest as of the grave held everything in a state of expectancy.

The nocturnal rumble then began again. Pressing interrogations held up the horizon. Various storms assembled from different quarters of the night. They blended their several thunders. An intolerable sense of the infinite thickened round the man, and the solitude of humanity expressed itself in a despairing cry the fullness of which, for a moment, covered everything.

But the growls of thunder drowned this cry of the strayed traveller. A battle began, interspersed with cries and yieldings of ground. And when everything seemed appeased, the storm started afresh with a *faux-bourdon* sound which strained the listeners' nerves to breaking-point. It must all be fought over again.

Meanwhile the soul had regained its valour. The forces were now equally matched. They measured their strength and sought to avoid each other. It was then that the implacable movement of destiny intervened. Nature preferred total subversion to a renunciation. No capitulation satisfied the enraged powers, who find their reckoning neither in the humiliation of the conquered nor in the solitary ecstasy of the conqueror.

Everything must be put to the question once again. Even the dying rose up to embrace one another. And suddenly,

without conclusion or warning, after an imperious summons to the stricken champions, the first movement came to an end.

Joseph no longer thought of Hélène's playing. He was possessed equally by exaltation and terror. He heard the last oscillations of the titanic combat die away. And he watched, upon Hèlène's hard and absent face, for the apparition of the unknown god whose existence had supplanted her own.

He had lost all control of himself when he approached her and said to her, point-blank : " Is *that* why they call you Clandestine ? "

Hélène's eyes were glued to her music-book. She had refused to let herself hear his approach. She started violently. A crimson flush flooded her face and neck and ran down to the tips of her fingers.

" Oh ! The brute, the brute ! " she thought, and turned her face away for fear of bursting into tears.

But Justin, too, had risen. The Beaune gave him the self-possession of a pope : " You know, Mademoiselle Le Pleynier, Uncle Jos plays the flute. . . ."

Hélène summoned up her last remains of energy and directed at Joseph Simler an expression of icy ferocity, " Indeed ? I am enchanted to hear it ! That is really very good ! " And she burst out laughing.

" If he kills me, I shall have deserved it. But why did he say that to me ? "

Joseph was the next to speak : " Whose is that piece that you have just played, Mademoiselle ? " He uttered this question on so paternal a note of imploration, with so helpless, so confident a respect, that to hear it was like a friendly hand laid over one's eyelids and blotting out the nightmare.

" Beethoven," said Hélène in a faltering tone.

" I did not know," Joseph replied simply. " I have never heard the name."

She was obliged to look at him a second time. But it was this look that decided everything.

The stroke of three, sounding shortly after this, provoked a shout from M. Le Pleynier in the next room : " I don't want to drive you away, young men, but if they are expecting you to luncheon at home . . ."

Joseph could never afterwards remember what he had said, during the minutes that had preceded this return to ordinary life. He could see himself, standing beside the silent piano, inquiring, through his clenched teeth, of the inanimate statue of a woman : " Will you allow me to come again ? " and knowing, at the same moment, that she acceded to his desire.

When he found himself once more in the garden, gripping Justin's hand in his own, he summoned up the courage to turn his head. Still seated at her piano, rigid and white, Mlle. Le Pleynier had drawn back one of the curtains with her left hand and was watching Joseph's departure with an absent expression. She made no response either to the young man's bow, or to the timid gesture with which Justin, who had recovered his sobriety, touched his sailor hat.

The cold air gripped them. Uncle and nephew began to walk fast, Justin trotting to keep pace. When they reached the Boulevard du Grand Cerf, Justin broke the silence. He murmured the question :

" You aren't angry, Uncle Jos ? "

Joseph gripped his hand until he squealed, and sighed by way of answer. Justin felt sleepy, and his head ached.

They saw in the distance a small thin man, in a black jacket, bareheaded in defiance of the evening air. He was pacing up and down in an agitated fashion, stopped when he caught sight of them, then ran to meet them.

" Where have you been ? What on earth has happened ? " he shouted in a choking voice. " We have been looking for

you everywhere for the last four hours. What on earth has happened ? "

" Why, nothing," replied Joseph, genuinely surprised. Justin, less detached from the world of reality, felt the storm approaching and drew back.

" Oh, indeed ! Indeed ! Are you both mad ? " shouted Guillaume as he reached them, breathless. He had lost all control of himself.

Joseph protested : " What is the matter ? Really, Guillaume ! "

" Not hurt ? Then nothing has happened ? You simply come home at four o'clock when we've been waiting for you since noon. You are . . . I consider that you're behaving like . . ."

" Guillaume ! " Joseph interrupted him, exasperated by his shouting.

" Like scoundrels. Your mother is out of her wits with fear. Go in and comfort her, as quick as you can. . . . But where . . ."

It is unnecessary to print all the wild things that a man says in a crisis of panic and excitement. Joseph left him and quickened his pace. An ignominious scene awaited the latecomers. It will surprise no one who is acquainted with the admirable strength of family solidarity. Hermine had no sooner caught sight of her son than she burst out sobbing. Hippolyte advanced a couple of paces and raised his hand to strike the boy. Myrtil, leaning against the porcelain stove, watched them enter the room and seemed unable to contain his disgust. Sarah called Joseph to her and greeted him with eyes ablaze with anger. Guillaume so far forgot himself as to grip his son from behind and squeeze his shoulders, shouting as he did so. Blum and his wife looked on at the scene with an air of terrified reproach, while Laure, infected with the prevailing excitement, sobbed aloud, her head buried in her aunt's lap.

Patience was not Joseph's strong point. It did not take much to make the general tone leap to a terrible diapason.

"Joseph!" Sarah shouted at her son, who had made a somewhat heated reply to a question as to how they had been spending the day. Hippolyte turned to him: "What is the matter? You answer your mother like that?"

"I allow nobody to address me in that tone, even here."

"Don't shout at me. Where have you been with this boy?"

"I shall answer when you are all more calm."

"You are an insolent wretch, hold your tongue!"

"You can hold your tongues! What are you all shouting about? Anyone would think I had murdered him!"

"Shameful son!" Sarah hissed, as she drew herself up in her armchair.

"Where have we been? In a house to which you ought to have gone six months ago, if you had any sense of your own dignity."

"You seem to enjoy yourself there!" retorted Sarah.

"One breathes a different atmosphere there, that is certain."

Joseph was saying, probably, more than he really meant. Hippolyte was beside himself with rage.

"Get out! Leave this room!"

"With pleasure," cried Joseph, moved nevertheless by his father's state. And he left the room, banging the door behind him so that the whole house shook.

The chill air of the attic that served him as a bedroom (ten feet by twelve) restored his self-control. He plunged his face in water, and soon came to regard his behaviour as the last word in absurdity. Occasional sobs rose from the room beneath. He reproached himself with having stupidly made Justin's case all the blacker, and remained in his room until supper time, trying to read by the light of a candle, his head burning and his conscience ill at ease.

Laure came timidly to call him through the shut door.

He felt his rancour revive as he went downstairs to the dining-room. He found the others assembled round the table. The poor people looked so crushed, so broken, that no anger could hold out against such misery.

Joseph told himself, once again—the scene that afternoon was by no means unique—that his violence always ended by intimidating them. He took his seat, unfolded his napkin and shrugged his shoulders with a sigh of boredom. The remains of his anger yielded with a painful effort to pity, a pity that lacked sympathy but was unbounded, and almost inevitably meant weakness.

Supper passed in the most profound silence. None of them tasted a morsel. They felt that the delicate episode would begin only after the termination of this futile ceremony.

At that moment Joseph rose, went to his mother, grasped her hand and kissed her on the brow. She stiffened, for form's sake, but a minute later she was sobbing on her son's shoulder. M. Hippolyte, with an aggressive countenance, gazed at his empty plate and drummed on the table with his knife.

Sarah effected the reconciliation between the two men, who embraced coldly, as was their habit upon such occasions. There followed half an hour of maudlin sentimentality, which Justin interrupted most opportunely by showing signs of acute indigestion.

Left alone in the company of their sons and Myrtil, the Simlers discussed the Le Pleyniers calmly and sensibly, as they might have done six hours earlier. It was then that it was decided, Hermine having meanwhile reappeared, that a call would be paid on them, on the following Sunday, to thank them for the kitten.

Then it was time for M. Hippolyte and Myrtil to take their walk through the town. Joseph did not take his flute. He and his brother remained with the women, talking by fits and starts, and raking over, each by himself, the ashes of

the furnace in which they had all seemed about to be destroyed.

Joseph said to himself : " And yet we said nothing to each other ! I don't even know the feel of her hand in mine."

Meanwhile Hélène, gazing into the outer darkness, over the dome formed in the lamplight by her father's scalp, was proceeding, without pity for herself or for anyone else, to an ardent surgical exploration of her conscience.

She completed the first operation at the hour when Joseph rose to go to bed. " What has happened to me ? How well he said : *I have never heard the name*. That little ignorant child leaned towards me, and his strength held out a hand to me, with what kindness ! Wingless Victory, O Wingless Victory, you were in need of kindness, to-day, poor feeble Victory without wings ; and it was that little child-man that showed you it."

XVII

JOSEPH TOOK LEAVE OF ABSENCE AT FIVE O'CLOCK ON WEDNESday to go to Le Plantis to give warning of the projected visit. He had taken some pains with his toilet. His outward appearance gained nothing thereby. Better not to speak of his taste in the matter of neckties. But what is, to a woman, a man who is already perfect in every respect ? Precisely as Miss Threegan said of an unwaxed moustache, he is like an egg without salt.

There was plenty of salt in Joseph. And he returned home, that Wednesday evening, in a state of excitement which nobody, not even his family, could fail to observe.

The most serious thing about it was that he went there again, upon Saturday, beguiling himself with the pretext that he ought to enlighten M. Le Pleynier as to certain of his relatives' peculiarities. But M. Le Pleynier, who was not surprised to see him arrive (it never surprised him that

anybody else should find pleasure in coming to see him), yawned in his face and was afterwards bound in honesty to confess that this Simler did, at times, talk in the most extraordinary fashion.

He returned there, naturally, on the following day, Sunday, full-blown as a peony and bursting with pride, notwithstanding the snowy weather which chapped everybody's lips and reduced Laure to hemiplegic smiles.

Sarah could not forget certain things that he had said. She had determined to study for herself people so full of attractions. An instinctive mistrust gave force to Hermine's colourless reserve. It had not been possible to persuade either Hippolyte or Myrtil to pay this call. The excuse of the kitten they thought unworthy of themselves. Guillaume went there as he would have gone anywhere else, satisfied with the Sunday holiday, with the outing, equally prepared to be amused or bored as the case might be. Whenever he went outside the factory, he found himself facing life like a docile, timorous schoolboy. As for Laure, infected with an infernal curiosity by Justin's reports and Joseph's assiduity, she proceeded slyly to make the same preparations for battle as the two women.

Although shorn of its two ships of the line and preceded by a radiant pilot, the Simler squadron sailed into the enemy's harbour, in the grimmest, most circumspect fashion, with masked batteries but with loaded guns.

And yet it is no exaggeration to say that they were received with flying colours. M. Le Pleynier had been feasting upon this interview for days past. As for Hélène, she had not failed to see that there existed between Joseph and the rest of his family an enigmatic bond, which was one neither of judgment nor of mutual understanding, but one so to speak of substance, which she had never observed among any other family.

It was hard to resist Mlle. Le Pleynier. She had got it

into her head that the Simlers would not resist her. Did she trust too blindly in her instinct? Or was it the desire to do too much that made her overshoot her goal? What is certain is that she was completely mistaken as to the kind of woman before whom she was about to manœuvre.

She had no sooner kissed Laure than she realised that she had broken an unknown law. And this element of the unknown grew steadily denser round about her. She laughed, and laughed alone. She spoke, and felt that her words were not understood. She made much of her guests, and her advances, whose charm would have melted the snows of Greenland, were shattered against an iceberg of hostility.

Out of her element, she was seized by fear, and fear exaggerated her most kindly but most dangerous impulses.

"When people resist me, I weary them to death," was one of her sayings. She did not say it to boast, but as a statement of that imperious process of her nature, which transformed everything into vital energy, even irritation.

"What are these women made of?" she asked herself anxiously. She was like a jumper upon a too-elastic springboard. At every spring she overshot her mark.

It was a long time before she realised what she ought to have borne in mind from the first. She came of a country which had lost, in the wars of the Revolution and Empire, three million of its male population, the young and the best—the feeble alone remaining, during a score of years, to marry the women and beget the children. That the women immediately felt a crushing superiority to their weakly husbands, that, with the aid of the clergy, they had taken the education of the children into their own hands, and assumed, for a century, the secret control of family, public business, and society; of all this Hélène was not unaware; nor that France was still, at that moment, condemned by the best statisticians to remain, until the end of the nineteenth century, a country dominated by women. She had seen and

continued to see the traces of this state of things in everything round about her, incessantly.

But she was unaware that there existed also, in France, at that moment, a small group of people, to which the Simlers belonged, endowed with sobriety, endurance, subtlety, passion, and a somewhat corroded strength, among whom the male reserves were more or less intact and who had, from all time past, kept women in their obscure subjection as bearers of children and oriental slaves.

Hélène advanced to meet Sarah, Hermine and Laure as an ally and an equal. What she found facing her were women taken from the seraglio and blinking their eyes painfully at the light of the outer world. In taking hold of Laure to kiss her with a too personal impulse, she had violated the hermetic rights of the clan and assailed the exclusive claims of family devotion. By speaking freely of every subject under the sun, she raised against her ten centuries of ignorance and credulity.

A woman, such as were the Simler women, belongs only to her husband, her father, her brothers, her sons. Everything that lies outside the circle of domestic service is to her alien, and a menace, in the front rank of which Hélène figured thenceforward as the aggregate of all the snares which the vast world sets for the eternal stupidity of males.

What could be the significance, to such women, of the terms of the pact that Hélène was offering them : " Let us be friends, and secure his happiness " ? Happiness is not secured. It *exists*, by a mechanical process, wherever the women of the clan are found to obey and to surround *them* ; it is a heresy to suppose that there can be any question of it upon a different ground.

And so Hélène spent the day in laying down her cards before women who refused to see in them anything but the wiles of Satan and the snares of the Occident. By the evening, she was shattered, and foresaw defeat.

Joseph's satisfaction, throughout that afternoon, was unclouded. But this sign, by itself, terrified Hélène. She realised the place, the nature, the solidity of the bond. She felt the same impression as before of an anthill, and on every side came up against the implacable presence of the tribe.

" He seemed to be in a hurry to go, so as to find out as quickly as possible what his mother thought."

Hélène knew only too well what she must be thinking. She forced herself not to think of the moment in which the young man would surrender to that influence.

For, at every moment, she found it less possible to overlook the existence of a second element, of which she was surprised to find that she had never dreamed : relegated as they might be to subordinate functions, the women of the clan still enjoyed a domain of their own in which their men of action took care not to disturb them. A tacit distribution of parts allotted to them the high hand in everything that concerned opinion—business being left out of account. Observation and judgment were their affair. Man, whatever his own secret feeling, waited until they had spoken and agreed. And if you will take the trouble to consider it, you will see that the unity of the family requires this. To man belongs the decision as to the war-path ; to woman, the fierce defence of hearth and home, and the right to judge other women.

" He doesn't imagine for a moment that they can like me, but neither does he imagine that he can never marry a woman whom they dislike," she concluded, as she watched him give his arm to his mother and disappear with her along the frost-bound road. Hermine led one of her children with each hand. Guillaume approached her with a movement analogous to that which drew Joseph towards Mme. Hippolyte.

That same evening, Sarah found the excuse of an order

at the *Bon Marché*, which she begged Cousin Mina to undertake for her, in order to make Joseph spend the following Friday with the Sterns. The writing out of this order took an unconscionable time and required six large pages of Yiddish.

On the Thursday, Joseph went up again to Le Plantis. Never had complete isolation from everything seemed to Hélène so horrible. Snow had been falling heavily. Even Hilaire had ceased to go down to the town.

" Vendeuvre might be destroyed, I should know nothing about it," she thought, with a sort of cold dismay. She looked at her father sitting by the fire, busy over his correspondence with his tenants. " Would anyone know even here, if I were to die ? "

She had waited, without hope, without even authorising herself to wait, all Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. When his step crunched on the hard snow, in the darkness, she bowed her head and absorbed herself in her knitting, counting the stitches.

He told her that he was terribly busy. He had had the greatest difficulty in getting away. He seemed just as usual. Her joy at his return, when she had been so certain of never seeing him again, was powerless against the annoyance of having had to wait four days for it. She had been afraid of finding him cold or embarrassed ; that he should be as he had always been, without any perceptible modification, seemed to her, after a few moments, a more menacing symptom.

The fact was that he could not help coming, but was controlling himself. Between his mother and himself, nothing had yet been said, otherwise he would not have come again, or would have done so only after mature deliberation. But the sapheads were pierced, and the enemy was advancing along the traverses. Joseph had not thought of denying himself the pleasure that he found in visiting Le Plantis.

A mere trifle would have sufficed to convert this pleasure into a definite intention. But this mere trifle had been dispersed, had evaporated since Sunday, and his mother's silence had sufficed to disperse it.

" I am going to take a turn along the road," he had said when he left the factory, at half-past five. He had not said : " I am going to Le Plantis."

Hélène knew this as clearly as if she had been with him at that moment. When he informed her that he was leaving for Paris, next day, she felt a pang of anguish which she strove in vain to stifle. It was not jealousy. It was dread of the unknown peril. It took shape in a hallucination : Joseph, knocked down by an omnibus, trampled under the hooves of the horses, at the very entrance to the station, the broken glass of his spectacles gouging out one of his eyes.

But Mademoiselle Le Pleynier was Mademoiselle Le Pleynier. Joseph was unable to carry away any impression of her, that evening, save that of a somewhat taciturn friendliness.

Her father and she supped briefly upon tea, toast and jam. He settled down, immediately after supper, to his *Souvenirs d'un républicain sur le Coup d'Etat*, and she took up her knitting. She remembered, with a horrible gripping of her heart, that Joseph had asked her, a week earlier, yielding to his inclination to tease, how long it would take her to clothe all the babies in the Department. She had replied, in the same jesting tone, that the newborn naked babes outnumbered the sands of the sea, but that, anyhow, her knitting was not what he supposed it to be.

" What is it then ? " he had said.

" It is the rosary of our lay cloister."

" And what office do you hold in the community ? "

She remembered, with a blush, that she had answered :

" The sister at the gate, Sir, the one who watches, like Sister Anne, for the dust rising along the road."

And remembering what she had not said, but had nearly added, she turned crimson with shame :

" However, the Knights upon the road are for Lady Bluebeard. There was never any idea of their being for Sister Anne."

" The sister at the gate . . . " these words and the image that they conveyed haunted her brain, with the gimlet-like persistence of a nightmare.

To escape from it, she took from a shelf a volume of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. From the Goethean well she could draw without fail peace of mind as to the past, courage for the future.

She went on reading for some time, and discovered that she was not taking in what she read. She turned back, paragraph by paragraph, to the beginning of this leakage, and found its origin and its reason when she saw start up before her eyes the following lines :

" To be detached from everything, and, most of all, from love and friendship, was my supreme desire, my motto, my practice. So that the bold words which come after : ' If I love you, what does it matter to you ? ' was the genuine cry of my heart . . . "

Hélène had perhaps no need of Goethe to think in similar terms. She did need him to make her think thus at that particular moment. And this was not one of the least important aspects of her reading.

Then an episode in their conversation that afternoon weighed like a stone upon her bosom. Talking of the Sunday visit, Hélène kept on reverting to Laure. With more purpose than he usually adopted, Joseph had asked her, in his way of saying things point-blank : " But what did you think of my mother and my sister-in-law ? "

What Hélène had then felt cannot be expressed in the

vocabulary of works of peace. She had indeed felt herself swept away by the Wind of Opportunity, which does not blow a second time. A glance had assured her of her power over the Alsatian, who remained seated, his head inclined towards her as though swollen by expectancy and by a trace of alarm, his gaze frank behind his spectacles. An intoxicating certainty had seized hold of her.

"I am Victory. I have only to rise, and who would resist me? Am I not Victory?"

It was sufficient for her to speak, and to say but little, in moderate terms, to raise her face once, at the right moment. She would deal Sarah and Hermine two blows for each of theirs, choosing her ground, and would win, by a swift offensive, that decisive victory which the man was offering her.

Instead of which, she had kept everything to herself, and had remained silent. Or rather the words that she had uttered came to little more: compliments, personal tributes, friendly trivialities.

There had been raging in her, since before dinner, the wrath of an Amazon discomfited in battle. And, as she measured the extent of the irreparable, she felt sickened by spasms of despair.

And so there was, that evening, another soul to which Goethe restored peace. She found herself at last, and ceased to doubt.

"*If I love him, what does it matter to him?* If he can be happy in a way which involves neither choice nor division, am I sufficiently certain of the superiority of what I can bring him to impose it upon him? Is it not enough for my pride to know that I can? Let fate decide, perish everything that is not meant to live. I remain at my post and strive no more. Let him join me if he is to join me. Faithful heart, constant heart, unswerving, burning heart! I am losing, probably, the only man that I shall ever meet

To

upon my path. *But if I love him, what does it matter to him?*"

Mlle. Le Pleynier's bedroom was white, narrow and bare —the cell of a nun or of a Cæsar. She bade her father good night and shut herself up in it, wholly absorbed, as she wrote to Dear and Great Friend, in "plucking that Wingless Victory, in case her wings should decide to grow again."

XVIII

"THEY REALLY ARE THE WORTHIEST PEOPLE ALIVE," THOUGHT Joseph in the train that was bringing him back to Vendeuvre, on the following evening. The Sterns had made much of him. He could not help laughing at Elisa's aspirated sibilants. But it was a hearty laugh. It seemed as though the stout girl had all of a sudden abandoned her pert airs.

"Shall we go to Passe-Lourdin?" Joseph asked Justin the following Sunday, when he came downstairs, shaved to the quick, smelling of soap, sparkling with cold water. Justin was making a fair copy of an exercise by lamplight. Day had not yet dawned.

Sarah brought in their coffee and milk which they took in great earthenware bowls patterned with blue flowers. Joseph devoured in addition half a *kugelhopf*, two eggs, half a pound of cold meat and a few gherkins.

"Why shouldn't you go with them?" said Sarah to Guillaume in a compelling tone. They set off, a party of four, including Laure. Dawn was staining one corner of the frozen surface of the night.

Guillaume opened his eyes wide when they came to Passe-Lourdin.

"Don't you think this a charming spot?"

"Ye-es. For what purpose?"

Joseph smiled a superior smile: "To live in."

Guillaume's brow wrinkled like an accordion, and with a nervous gesture he sucked one end of his moustaches between his teeth.

" I wouldn't say . . . To live in ? And do nothing, you mean ? "

" Do what is necessary."

The necessary had, to Guillaume, exactly the same boundaries as the possible : " Listen, you would never dream. . . ."

" You know . . . plenty of ideas . . . And why not, after all ? "

" But the factory, Choseph, our duty. . . ."

" All right, all right. Who spoke of leaving the factory ? We shall pay our debts, of course. The rest . . ."

" The rest ? Where do you see any rest ? Joseph, once more I cannot understand these new ideas. You are not serious. Do you really think of settling down here, in this . . . ? But where will you get the money ? To live here by yourself ? No ! With whom, then, Joseph ? "

The question was rather too near the mark. It took Joseph by surprise. He believed, however, that it was answered for him. But it was answered only in theory, not in fact. On the other hand, Guillaume had not accustomed him to making such definite statements, apart from questions of flock or carded wool. Somebody or something was guiding him. Joseph was uneasy rather than irritated.

" Go and play with Justin," Guillaume told Laure.

" No, stay here. What else is there to be said ? Besides, you have seen everything, for the present. This is the path that takes us back to Vendeuvre."

" Are we going to stop at Monsieur Le Pleynier's ? " asked Laure. Joseph pretended not to hear, and quickened his pace.

In the meantime Sarah had received a letter from Mina. It was not handed round, but it provided the subject of

conversation at luncheon. Hippolyte, his wife and daughter-in-law were inexhaustible upon the subject of the Sterns. There was no question of finding where the others had gone for their walk, that morning. Only, after luncheon, Sarah took care to have a long discussion with her elder son.

There are certain easy actions in the course of life which the least afterthought transforms into innovations of vast effect.

One of these was the visit which Mlle. Le Pleynier paid to the Simlers, that afternoon. Nothing simpler, one would have thought, than to call upon the ladies of the Boulevard du Grand Cerf in return for their courtesy of the week before. As M. Le Pleynier was going to the Club she made Hilaire drive her to the Simler's.

We must admit however that the affair appeared slightly more complicated, for Hélène, when she heard the bell tinkle inside the house, lost her head altogether. And it was a bloodless apparition that made Hermine start to her feet in a panic and sent a purple flush to Joseph's cheeks.

Sarah, when Laure came up to warn her, concluded her conversation with Guillaume with a peremptory nod, and went downstairs. It was time. Hermine, crushed under the burden of her mother-in-law's confidences, regarded Mlle. Le Pleynier as nothing less than a gorgon's head. Joseph, put to the torment by his sister-in-law's silence and Hélène's voiceless pallor, called upon the infernal powers to extricate him from the situation.

When Sarah entered the room, with the majesty of a Proconsul's dame who has prepared herself to receive the homage of a native queen, it was a relief. The stock of good will which Hélène had brought with her was still in close juxtaposition to the most bellicose tendencies, and Hermine's insignificance would have infuriated an angel.

But it did not take Hélène long to estimate the effort that was being required of her. Her voice hesitated for an

instant only between the shrill note of provocation and the soft pedal of renunciation. And it was Mme. Hippolyte who was given complete freedom to attack.

It would be untrue to say that this lady did not set to work with her whole heart. Finding the field clear, her assault became a charge. Everything that frigidity, scorn and suspicion can bring to bear, outside the strict limits of the offensive, was put into effect with a dignity and a valour which Hélène could not help admiring.

But also the Simler ladies were upon their own ground. Women of their sort show their mettle only within their own doors and among their own furniture. They lose everything by transplantation.

Let it not astonish us either that Mme. Hippolyte was not alarmed by the surprising readiness of a girl whose merit she ought to have appreciated. We must never expect of people what they are unable to give. If twenty centuries of seraglio arm a woman for the inexpiable warfare of the home, they do not, on the other hand, predispose her to equity.

Mlle. Le Pleynier was there, the only one of her sex with any conception of disinterestedness. That she was deeply pained is beyond question. Would she have come, had not a gleam of hope remained? And the presence of Joseph, a helpless onlooker, filled her with a revolt the murmur of which, at several points in the conversation, nearly rose to a shriek.

But she bowed her head. Her grave voice gradually assumed that social resonance which covers everything, and denies everything, even death.

"If I love him, what does it matter to him? If he wishes, let him come and take me. A heart that bleeds does not budge. . . ."

Once again, but for the last time doubtless, the demon of humility assumed in her the cast-off cloak of pride and

deceived her as to the part it had to play. She who valued her happiness at the price of blood, by what right did she claim to spare another's happiness all struggle?

Did the Clandestine understand the indwelling flaw in her strategy when, twenty minutes later, with a smile on her face, and the chill of death in her heart, she bade the ladies farewell and returned to her dogcart, escorted by Guillaume and Joseph?

She cast a glance as she went by at the factory, and another, slightly more covert, at Joseph.

Although they were mere men, Guillaume, who was forewarned, and Joseph had missed none of the phases of this duel.

But even if Sarah had not acted under the compulsion of instinct alone, she could have had no more effective policy than that of putting her son at once, as she had just done, under the necessity of making a choice.

She knew that there was no precedent, in the clan, that the alternative had never been stated in the form required by the law of the family. If there was one, Sarah pretended to be unaware of it. What was more, she had provided for it. Not for nothing was she the wife of Hippolyte, the *Königin Simler*. And restricted as her world was, her provisions had always contrived to make, in the present, allowance for the future.

Hélène would, in similar circumstances, have depised any other man. She pitied Joseph and forgot to pity herself. She had, moreover, retained this right alone.

"Could the poor fellow have foreseen this?"

When the cart drove away, she studied the lining of her glove, and everything became confused and flickered before her eyes.

Joseph left the house immediately afterwards to pay Hector a visit. Guillaume remained between his mother and his wife, who henpecked him until the evening. Sarah

announced that the Sterns would arrive upon Christmas Eve, which fell upon Thursday, and decided that Guillaume should discourse with Joseph of various matters, beginning next day.

Guillaume was appalled at this mission. But the calamity of which his mother had given him a hint appalled him even more. Besides, the expedition that morning to Passe-Lourdin had caused him an uneasiness which Mlle. Le Pleynier's visit did not allay.

He could no longer sleep at night. He slept only one night in three. He had begun to waste away and was subject to nervous fits which nothing could control. He had become the destroyer of his own body and of other people.

At five o'clock on Monday morning, Joseph, who had not closed an eye either, came downstairs on tiptoe, when his attention was caught, as he was entering his warehouse, by a faint light which glimmered through the windows of the factory.

He went to examine it more closely. He had arrived at the stage of intellectual disorder when nothing can cause surprise. He saw a familiar figure patrolling the spinning-room between the machines.

Guillaume was carrying in one hand a candle, the flame of which he was sheltering from draughts with fingers like pink wax. The candle was guttering over his fingers and scalding him. All of a sudden he started violently and almost dropped the light. Joseph saw a dark object dart across the floor, a huge rat.

He could control himself no longer ; he went to the little door, pushed it open and entered the room amid the stiff skeletons of the machines. His ear was caught by a humming sound : Guillaume, at the other end of the room, with his back turned to him, was talking to himself.

Joseph at once said to himself that his brother was mad,

and remembered that sleepwalkers may die if they are suddenly awakened.

He called his brother softly : " Wilhelm ! Hey, Wilhelm ! "

But Guillaume did not hear him, and left the room by the door at the foot of the stair. Joseph followed him upstairs and passed in his wake down the long alley of the weaving-room, overtaking him, then allowing him to regain his lead.

On reaching the attic, which was stuffed with rubbish of every sort, Guillaume seemed to be annoyed by the disorder. He set his candle down on the edge of a case, and tried to push out of the way an old, broken, copper oil-barrel. With the vibration, the candle fell and went out, while the flapping of soft wings was audible from the roof.

" Wilhelm, what on earth are you doing ? " cried Joseph.

" Is that you, Jos ? " asked a toneless, ageless voice. " I have dropped my candle."

" So I see."

" Help me to get out of here."

Joseph could hear him fumbling and muttering.

" This way. Take my hand. What are you doing here."

" I couldn't sleep."

" Couldn't sleep, couldn't sleep, that's no excuse for . . . Are you often taken that way ? "

" What way ? "

" With this sort of sleeplessness."

" Sometimes. Have you found my candle ? "

" Don't bother about the candle, come downstairs and get warm. Do you often go roaming about the factory ? "

" Sometimes, yes."

The memory of a mysterious confusion that he had found one morning in his office, occurred to Joseph : " In the factory only ? "

" Why do you ask that ? "

" You must know. You have never gone into the warehouse ? "

" Possibly. I go everywhere."

" Then it was you ? "

" What ? . . . Possibly. Listen, I spend so many hours unable to sleep, I cannot remain in bed. Even if I don't move, I waken Hermine and the children. And then, being there alone, sitting up in bed, thinking, anything in the world is better than that. I get up, and go down to see if everything is in order."

" In my books ? I should never have believed it of you. You have been spying upon me."

" You are mad, Joseph ! I, spying upon you ? Where do you expect me to go, in the middle of the night ? When I have altered my price-list a dozen times, and answered my letters, I have nothing left to do. If I have opened your books . . ."

Joseph stood at the head of the stair, beside himself with rage : " I should not have made any objection. You had only to ask me for them ! "

" Why, what are you imagining, Joseph ? I opened your books without any definite idea, to kill time, to see what business we were doing and where we stood. Surely we have no secrets from one another, here."

" That is precisely why. Your behaviour has not been frank."

" Do you know what it is to go without sleep for three nights in a week, sometimes more ? I had no intention of insulting you. But I could not let you know. We don't discuss such things, Jos, after all."

Joseph could not see Guillaume's features. But his voice was strained by his emotion.

" Three nights in a week ? You go to sleep every evening at nine."

" I go to sleep at nine, yes, but at eleven, it is all over.'

A feeling of shame or of pity made Joseph say : " Then, when we tease you about your habit of falling asleep . . ."

" That is of no importance, Joseph, so long as the rest don't know."

" Has it been going on for long ? "

" I don't remember. It must have begun during the war."

" And it is getting worse ? "

" Yes."

Joseph began to go downstairs : " Have you found the rail ? Take care. You know, it's not good for you, this sort of thing."

" I know. What am I to do ? "

" Have you taken anything for it ? You ought to see somebody."

" Oh, we have it in our blood. It is devouring us all."

" You have worries ? "

" One has always worries."

" You're a thorough Simler, you are ! "

" And you ? " replied Guillaume, his voice, on this occasion, recovering its trenchant tone.

Joseph avoided the point : " Oh, I ! "

They groped their way down to the landing outside the weaving-room, the door of which had been left open. A livid glimmer floated through the wide bays of the room.

Down below, Pailloux's lantern was advancing through the darkness towards his engine. Guillaume stepped into the glazed office and tried, with a trembling hand, to light his father's oil lamp.

Now, it must be borne in mind that this oil lamp was the very same which had burned ever since their childhood upon M. Hippolyte's desk. The furniture of the glazed office was the same which had served at a different time and place. And we must not lose sight of the fact that the two men who stood face to face, at that hour, were two Simlers, from Buschendorf, transplanted like cuttings to Vendeuvre,

to undergo a new destiny. With the result that, when Guillaume raised his narrow profile, like that of a Persian king, and his eyes hesitatingly sought Joseph's, there was already a considerable change in their relative positions.

And so it was with less assurance in a tone in which physical weariness was already apparent, that Joseph went on : " What is the cause of your worries ? "

Guillaume's conviction thereupon achieved the very stroke which a shrewd policy might have suggested to him.

" Is it true ? " he cried, seizing his brother's arm. " Is it true, Choseph ? "

Joseph was prepared for anything, save for being forced to look into his own heart.

" What ? What do you mean ? "

" Ah ! Then it is true ! " Guillaume concluded on a note of despair. " It is true ! " And he released his brother's arm.

" But in heaven's name, tell me ! "

" Tell you what ? What you know already ? What everybody knows ! "

" Everybody is very clever and discerning. I don't understand a word of what you're saying."

" Oh ! Choseph ! Why did you do it ? "

By dint of certainty, Guillaume listened to nothing that the other said and went on answering himself. Ten minutes later, there was not a dark corner left in Joseph's consciousness. He knew what he would so gladly not have known yet awhile, and his brother's feverish hand parted, with a mystic frenzy, the viscid lips of the wound.

" You cannot, you cannot do a thing like that."

Rage and grief kept Joseph pacing to and fro in the glazed office. His solid throat buried itself between his shoulders, his fists were forced against the bottoms of his pockets.

" Who gave you leave ? Why did you do it ? "

Neither of them could make use of any but the vaguest expressions : they had " done it." What was the issue at

stake? For Guillaume, it was the maintenance of the inflexible laws of the clan. For Joseph, the protection of intimate aspirations, less easily defined.

" I do not deny that the girl has many merits," drawled Guillaume, carried away by a sacrificant's inebriation, and terrified by his brother's anger.

" What do you know about it? Do you know her? Have you any idea of her worth? "

" I do not deny it, although neither Mamma, nor Hermine, nor myself . . . But you cannot have been entirely mistaken."

" Very good of you. But what are you getting at, may one know that at least? "

" At this, Joseph : whatever may happen, whatever you may feel, there is one thing that is impossible, which is to do anything that affects the family and the factory. You cannot leave us, you cannot create a division among us."

Let those who think that Joseph had merely to reply : " I am going to marry Mademoiselle Le Pleynier and I am not going to divide myself from you," raise their heads, look around them, in the heart of the Republic One and Indivisible, and say whether there are not more things unwritten than written in the text of the Law.

Joseph had no need, at that moment, of any skill in sociology to discover that thirty centuries of commandments weigh far more heavily in the scales than an inclination a month old.

Whether it was the thirty centuries that were in the right or the month was a wholly different matter. Joseph was to have more than a year in which he was free to weigh them in the balance and start his calculations afresh. He did not fail to do so.

At the moment, he did indeed open his mouth, intending to reply : " What is the connection? I shall marry whom I choose, and I shall not divide myself from you."

But it so happened that he remained there gaping open-mouthed, on his feet, before the lamp, realising, as he unravelled each of his knots, that everything was connected and entangled with everything else.

Guillaume, in the meantime, knew better than to develop his line of thought. He barked, chokingly, at his brother, without equalling the speed or the precision with which the consequences outlined themselves in Joseph's mind.

"A *goy* girl among us? . . . You know that it is impossible . . . Mamma . . . you may do what you like . . . don't you see? . . . You know her . . . And besides . . . do you suppose that she . . . that she would consent? Would she turn *yid*? No, no . . . it would mean leaving us . . . leaving us, Joseph! . . . And what then? . . . Is it that Mâche . . . Mâche-Bourbin, that . . . little house which you showed me yesterday? . . . That, for you? . . . Your life spent there, Joseph? . . . And us? You would leave us, the factory, our debts? . . . To live simply, spend nothing, give up work . . . what you have undertaken? Your duty? . . . And I? When Papa and Uncle Myrtil are no longer with us, I am to be left alone, alone . . . alone?"

The thought of this seized him as it passed. And he was all the more alarmed by it in that he had not said all. He had kept to himself the picture of a Hélène whose sole preoccupation would be to make good Catholics of Joseph Simler's children. This was not for want of believing it. In the matter of knowledge of women, you must bear in mind that neither Hermine nor Sarah was capable of error. Guillaume saw—as clearly as they had shown him them—the ruses of a cautious sister-in-law, shrouded in a long black religious veil, creeping along at nightfall and leading a procession of his nephews and nieces to the dark trap of the confessional.

But the fact of his having stopped short of this argument,

from a secret male modesty, increased the alarm that he felt at the other prospects which he had revealed. Most of all, the sword of his own eventual solitude pierced him to the heart. It made him stammer with terror.

" Alone ! I should have to give up everything, all thought of enlarging the works, of taking on fresh business. Or else, go and look, yes, look for a partner, perhaps . . . Joseph ! While you . . ."

An idea shot across his mind ; he seized it, for what it might be worth, and it turned out to be of the highest order : " It is true that Penchamin, yes, has gone away, but that was to do more, to work. He has had a sense of his duty. I do not share it. But a sense of duty, all the same. Whereas, whereas . . . Ach ! it is not possible."

At the end of all the tracks that crossed his own thoughts, Joseph, for his part, could see something dawning which resembled his brother's conclusion. Then he emerged abruptly from his state of semi-hallucination, shrugged his shoulders and turned his back.

Behind him extended the weaving-room. The beam of light shed by the lamp was broken, as it entered that vast space, by the body of the nearest loom. The wood of the batten, polished by use, sped away, taking the light with it, towards a darkness bristling with shadowy forms.

If ever an oily tongue of yellow flame was able to speak for anyone, it was for the two men who were in that office. Each of the fibres of that silence, muscular and hard, had its echo in them. The former nonentity of the Poncet factory, that empty, silent corpse, had not by its own unaided effort acquired substance, strength, mass, been transformed into this dark pomegranate. Their toiling shoulders still recalled the effort of uprooting, and the violent struggle to establish a shadow in a spot where the tree had not grown.

But who knew so well as they that the void was still not

far off? Who but a Simler ever knew what is meant by a plank that quivers and sways, poised over an abyss?

And so Guillaume was royally wasting his time in developing, rightly or wrongly, points of view which the weaving-room itself was sufficient to express. From the chaos of contradictions, one conclusion rose now in Joseph's mind: "Is it possible to retain the one while saving the other?"

The man of Buschendorf, the man of cloth, was beginning to realise that to abandon the one was a thing not to be dreamed of. Then the problem appeared to him all of a sudden to have become quite simple: Passe-Lourdin—the day spent here, the night there, life framed in that setting of happy activity.

"And why not?" he growled, turning solidly to face Guillaume. "You will drive me out of my wits! How in the world does my private life affect my work in the factory? Is it the factory that is marrying me?"

"Yes," cried Guillaume without giving himself time to hesitate. And he had no sooner said it, than the piercing truth of the word took the breath out of his mouth. Awkwardly, he added, in a quieter tone:

"The factory, the family, there is no difference, two aspects of the same thing."

"And what is that thing?" Joseph sneered. He had almost forgotten the third term of the proposition. The equation became insoluble.

His brother gazed at him in surprise. How could anyone not know things that were so simple that there are not even words in which to express them? Their great-grandfather, Mosche Hertz Simler *selig*, had founded the factory, the grandfather and his sons had enlarged it, against wind and tide, the grandsons had transported it, piecemeal. Today, *Chustin* was at the head of his class in the lycée, and the Simler team, closely united in good as in evil fortune,

was dragging, groaning beneath the yoke, the heavy chariot to the conquest of Vendeuvre.

" What is that thing ? It is that we have never been anything but one heart and one mind, and that, *among our people*, it has always been the same."

For an hour and a half these two men had been torturing each other, and the magic word had only now been uttered. But it covered everything. Joseph felt that it was one of those things which we try to elude but which we do not deny. And as if this were not enough, Guillaume, faithful to the spirit of a race which does not know what it is to destroy outside itself in order to build up inside, held out to Joseph a pair of bony hands, carved in browned ivory, and exclaimed : " Chos ! My Chos ! We all of us have some inward suffering. And why do we not die of it ? Because we must sacrifice ourselves to something. Chos ! Remain one of us, do not leave us either in heart or in thought. It is not for myself that I ask you, nor even for Mamma. But there is duty, there is our tradition, our obligations, there is—disinterestedness."

Only the day before, not a hundred yards away, in the presence of these two men, Hélène Le Pleynier had repeated this word to herself. Did she deserve that, turned like the finger of a glove, it should now be used against her ?

Joseph had failed to understand all that had happened the day before. But he guessed enough of it for this word to wound him keenly. He raised towards Guillaume a swollen, mottled face : " That will do. We shall discuss it another time. You have said enough."

The floor creaked beneath a step. M. Hippolyte came in. He had seen the light, and came hastening with such speed as his gouty legs could muster.

He stopped to scrutinise his sons. The only sound to be heard was his asthmatic wheezing.

Are we to suppose that insomnia had sent him in his turn

to join them ? Or that, duly informed by his wife, he found no difficulty in interpreting the situation ? His large features became drawn together, his eyelids slid down over the bloodshot hemispheres of his eyes, and a contemptuous pity wrinkled the ends of his mouth. He made but a single gesture, which was that of laying his hand upon Joseph's shoulder. A thick voice, loud but restrained, gave utterance to these astonishing words : " We have all gone through it, Choseph. Every man must be unhappy once in his life. You have had no great unhappiness so far. It is an unpleasant thing to say, but now your turn has come. Take as much time as you please. Go away, travel, console yourself. You shall come back and work with us when it has passed."

Then he released his son's shoulder after gripping it for a moment in his swollen fingers, turned his back on him and addressed Guillaume in the imperious tone that he normally used :

" You and I. Myrtil will take charge of the warehouse during Choseph's absence. We shall divide the spinning. You can manage it ? Not too tired ? Heart not troubling you ? No ? A serious worker ? Very good. Have you a reply from Tuchartin about the cylinder for the machine ? "

And he accompanied this speech with an expression of nothing less than benevolence towards his elder son.

When Joseph found himself in the courtyard, he took note of two things : first of all, that his father's unprecedented gentleness did not alter the fact that he had been quietly shown the door of the factory for an unspecified time ; secondly, that he had neither anywhere to go nor anything to do.

Meanwhile M. Hippolyte was opening the floodgates of his wrath in Guillaume's face.

" The imbecile ! So he seriously thought of marrying that *goy* ? The daughter of a bankrupt manufacturer ? That

stuck-up minx? If he does anything of the sort, he can die in his ditch, neither his mother nor I will ever look at him again."

A blow of his fist crushed upon the table a horrible oath, and the flow of his curses made the interior of the glass cage echo until the first wail of the siren.

Guillaume was too exhausted, as he went to open the gate, to observe a motionless form, seated upon a corner-stone notwithstanding the cold, and bearing a resemblance to his brother.

" Uuu-uh ! " moaned the gate as it opened its jaws with an effort. For a quarter of an hour the feet of the workers clattered in the darkness. Rows of oil lamps punctuated the length of the rooms.

Joseph looked on at this spectacle as though he had never seen it before. The second cry of the siren reverberated over Vendeuvre. The sound of trotting clogs coursed along the avenue. The gate shut with the same wail and the same effort. A roar emerged from the interior of the building. The plunger of the cylinders made a long expectoration. The transmission shafts began to move.

Joseph shut his eyes : the workers were connecting the driving-band with the pulleys of their looms ; the little fasteners of the weaving-room were speeding on their course along the rows of shuttles. The first heavy sounds of the weaving-room echoed from the floor above. Farther off, the fulling-mills were set in motion, with a sound as of angry wasps ; the outflow of soapy water released, with a Vosgian murmur, a hotly, stalely smelling torrent. A sickly vapour began gradually to invade the courtyard. Joseph could hear, through an open ventilator, the cough of a young woman who was suspected of being consumptive, and the metallic scream of a spinning machine in which a broken piece required changing.

Uncle Myrtil's voice ground for an instant a series of

steel knives and was then drowned. Two cries echoed in the distance. Zeller's white overalls and muffler crossed the farther end of the courtyard. A shout of childish laughter burst from some unknown quarter, and remained without an echo.

The whole of Vendeuvre was athrob. The dark front of the factory shook from top to bottom. A line of rolling-mills seized a corner of the darkness and drew it towards themselves.

Then the cry of a sort of shrill and hoarse siren, more animal still, if possible, burst from beyond the walls, near or far, it was impossible to say. It aroused others, which continued out of earshot. The cocks were saluting after their fashion the birth of a day which labour had not awaited.

Joseph turned his head. Something livid and wretched was surmounting the eastern wall. The slightest irregularities of tile or moss were already outlined against this light. A gust of wind flung itself down into the courtyard, as though in a panic. The young man rose, looked round him in every direction, and moved with a sharp step towards the warehouse, the key of which was weighing down his right pocket.

Half an hour later, the other three Simlers appeared there. They found Joseph, who greeted them with a cold, almost menacing stare. They said not a word, and returned each to the place from which he had come.

It was in this singular fashion that there were installed, for the second time, on this morning in December, eighteen hundred and seventy-two, the *Nouveaux Etablissements Simler*, at Vendeuvre.

PART III

I

THE TWENTY-THIRD OF DECEMBER, '72 WAS RENDERED famous in the annals of the Simler family by the disappearance of an enormous piece of *Derefleisch*, a triumph of Sarah's culinary art, and lovingly spiced for the benefit of the " Stern clique " (to use Justin's expression). A diligent search revealed its traces, stage by stage, from the shelf in the kitchen from which it had been removed to the corner of the courtyard in which " Kitten " had taken up his abode, on account of the peculiarly repugnant emanations that were wafted there from the dyeing-room.

" Kitten," caught unawares in actual possession of the *corpus delicti*, thereby pleaded guilty if not to larceny at least to resetting. It was Laure who solved the mystery. She astutely allowed herself time to weigh the pros and cons. Finally the clan spirit triumphed over *esprit de corps*. Even Justin's feelings were sacrificed at the feet of outraged law and order, and " Kitten " was violently denounced.

No time was wasted in inquiring whether the receiver was identical with the thief. For a long time past Grandmamma had been expressing her loathing of the " horror." The source from which the " horror " came was not accepted as a caution for it ; far from it. The outcry was great. And " Kitten," who had had time to grow up into a fine black and white Angora, was bestowed, with a thousand imprecations, upon the chair-mender whom chance had brought that way.

The announcement was made by Sarah, that evening at dinner. Justin, who had just come back from the lycée and knew nothing, sat open-mouthed with amazement. But

having turned to look at Uncle Jos, he saw him flush crimson, bite his lips, turn his eyes away, swallow a long draught of water, and remain silent. This was sufficient example for his nephew. He managed to retain a pair of scalding tears between his eyelids, and more or less concealed in an apparent fit of coughing the most unmanly of sounds.

The Sterns arrived on the following day, Christmas Eve, by the five o'clock train.

" You will come with us to meet them," Sarah said quietly to Joseph.

" I too," put in Justin, who had a holiday. Which brought down upon him the speedy retort : " You were not asked to speak."

He was nevertheless one of the party, and his absence would have been indeed deplorable. For he had first of all the spectacle of a most unusual Uncle Joseph. Just as they were about to start, he turned round and gazed attentively at the factory. It was impossible to say whether his expression was hostile or respectful. That little pitcher Laure was near enough to hear him murmur : " They are right. It is bigger than all of us put together."

She did not understand a word, but, being a woman, was none the less satisfied for that. Her uncle walked on ahead, far more stiffly than was usual with him. The Lefombère ladies approached upon the opposite pavement. He raised his hat with a careless gesture, and, a hundred yards farther on, waved his hand most patronisingly at the worthy Boulinier. If the truth must be told, Justin heard his uncle whistling, and whistling through his nose, if such a thing is possible. Upon reaching the level ground outside the station, at the top of the slope, the party turned round.

It was customary, from this spot, to admire the view of Vendeuvre. The guide-book commended it, and was not far wrong

The lamps were beginning to be lighted, in the thick mist of a winter evening. A dark liquid streamed between the banks of the canal. The chimneys were vomiting torrents of smoke. A confused din floated over the mass of factories, smoke and fog.

Justin and Laure began the invariable game of labelling each factory with the name of its owner. Their uncle was the great settler of disputes. Laure came racing towards him, followed by Justin, both greatly excited.

" Please, isn't that Monsieur Huillery's factory, those two chimneys, to the right of the market, down there ? "

" Pfft ! " replied Uncle Joseph, " what does Huillery matter ? He or any of them, it's six of one and half a dozen of the other. The Etablissements Simler will wipe away all those mouldy sheds before very long. You won't have to bother your heads about their names."

Joseph had not accustomed his little class to such aggressive utterances, nor to an abrupt tone, which seemed to be broken off short, nor indeed to seeing him turn on his heel and stalk off without another word.

They overtook him only in the station itself, to which Mme. Hippolyte hurried upon hearing the sound of voices raised in anger.

Had the porter really been rude, or was it Joseph whose question as to the lateness of the train from Paris had been uttered in an offensive tone ? Neither of the two heated men who stood face to face, shouting, in a circle of spectators, could possibly have told.

" Joseph ! " Mme. Sarah called out as she hurried to the spot. She had an inherited fear of anything that attracted attention. A white-cap broke up the throng : " You, Chaufaille, begin by holding your tongue."

" Has he any right to treat people like dogs ? No ! Did you see this dirty Prussian . . . "

" Unless you make that man keep quiet . . . "

" Chaufaille, oblige me by going off to the lamp-room without another word. If there is a complaint, I shall hear what you have to say when you are a little calmer."

" The insolence of these people . . . "

" Excuse me, Sir, would you mind coming with me to my office. You can explain to me more easily there . . . "

" Thank you, thank you. I have no wish to lodge a complaint. But it must not happen again."

" Just as you please," the white-cap concluded, as he turned away, trained by twenty years of service in the diplomacy of appeasing the public without betraying his subordinates, all for two thousand francs a year.

Joseph, for that matter, was not particularly proud of his own behaviour. And when Sarah and Hermine began in muffled tones to overwhelm the railway company, its staff, and the West as a whole, in a bitter lament, he turned his back upon them with an air of exasperation.

This enabled him to see approaching, at a walking pace, its two side-lamps lighted, a dogcart, the sight of which afforded him no pleasure. As it happened, a distant whistle announced the express. Chaufaille raced off to the end of the platform, stooped and pulled a switch. A roaring sound filled the station from end to end, and the bell began to dance in its cage.

" I told you we should be late," said a cross, nasal voice which rose over the barricade and penetrated the din of the station. A peal of laughter sounded in response, and Joseph wished earnestly that some urgent summons might make the devil come and open a trap-door in the platform upon which he was standing.

The "Crampton" glided slowly down the station followed by half a score of little irregular cubes, perched high upon their springs. The brakesmen clutched the rotating shafts that connected with the wheels. Their effort expelled from the coaches a shower of well-muffled persons who flung

themselves in the arms of the waiting crowd, filling the platform with clamour.

No creature more restrained than Elisa Stern, nor plumper, nor for that matter fresher of complexion, sprang that evening from that express, enveloped in her piercing laugh and her faint odour of palm-oil.

Joseph was not sufficiently interested in the spectacle not to see alight, from a first-class compartment, a great gaunt fellow whom M. Le Pleynier took in his arms with every sign of affection. Hilaire, who had arrived on the scene by his own means of transport, rose up with something more than his official smile on his face, climbed into the compartment, and reappeared loaded with a travelling bag, a sheathed sabre and two handsome pigskin valises.

" How good of you to have troubled," a sugared voice gushed in the ear of the younger Simler, while he was saying to himself : " Aha ! Julien ! "

And the vague misery which had kept a lump in his throat during the last two days almost thrust him upon the young man. M. Le Pleynier's eye had not missed Joseph. When they found themselves cheek by jowl, at the exit from the station, he waited sternly for the other's greeting which he acknowledged with an ample sweep of his hat. The Simler procession attracted the astonished, and immediately disapproving gaze of the Lieutenant in the Dragoons.

Joseph might do all that he could to prolong the ceremony of greeting, it was inevitable that M. Le Pleynier's courtesy should make him give place to the ladies, so that they all emerged pell-mell into the station yard. The dog-cart was drawn up by the footpath, and Mlle. Le Pleynier was holding the reins.

Notwithstanding the fact that it was placed there for the special requirements of the toll-collector and not for the general convenience, a gasjet lighted the passage sufficiently to make it impossible to pass unseen. Hélène greeted the

Simler ladies with the most gracious affability. She received nothing in return but a slight inclination of the little black plumes that stuck up from their hats. Joseph spent six months asking himself, in a cold sweat, whether he had lifted his hat or had simply turned his head away, with a snobbishness that deserved kicking.

And, as though this were not enough, M. Hippolyte and Myrtil must next appear, having come as a surprise, at this precise spot, whereupon a raising of arms, a rushing together and embracing with vigorous intonations, giving Hélène ample time to make her observations, and Elisa time to form the most rooted antipathy to the stranger, while she took care to display her right of possession over Joseph.

The dogcart, with the father and daughter in front, and Julien behind, bowled away without the Alsatians paying it the slightest attention. Hilaire, passing in and out, to his great delight, through the doors that were barred to the public, was engaged in collecting the lieutenant's luggage before conveying it away by his own private and personal means.

It may incidentally be supposed that two pairs of young eyes had derived ample profit and instruction from this unspoken comedy.

The time that Julien Le Pleynier was prepared to bestow upon his father and sister had reached its limit by ten o'clock on the following morning. The lieutenant might have been found, about that hour, calling upon a certain gentleman whom the brutalities of the fourth of September had restored to civil life and to the humble duties of a jobmaster. M. Antigny was full of regard for the arrogance of M. Le Pleynier junior, as well as for his indomitable contempt for the Republican Government. He therefore concealed from him nothing of what he and the rest of Vendeuvre had upon their hearts.

Having furnished himself with the information which he required, Julien mounted his horse again and made a detour in order to be able to leer, over his moustaches, at the humble factory of the Simlers of Buschendorf. Then he returned to Le Plantis, his head seething with resolutions.

He chose his opportunity when his father was taking him to inspect the kennels—an unsavoury duty included in each of his furloughs—to broach, with a quite military frankness, the subject that was worrying him.

At his first word, M. Le Pleynier halted, gazed at him, and gave vent to a superb peal of laughter.

In vain might Julien insist, extract from his pocketbook the budget of anonymous letters which had been raining upon him for the last three months, appeal to public opinion, swear that he did not like the look of these Simlers, that it was impossible to know people of that sort, he drew from his father nothing but renewed peals of laughter, and finally an affirmation full of pomp :

" And why not ? A very worthy fellow indeed ! But do not alarm yourself, *he would never dare*."

" What can they be jabbering about ? " Hélène asked herself as she saw them, through the blurred window-panes, arguing and gesticulating.

" I must talk to my sister about it," Julien said to himself with a quite military determination.

Hélène had no longer any hope. It was part of her temperament always to consider herself, and part of her system never to consider herself. And her system always prevailed over her temperament.

At the first obstacle, she had decided that the die was now cast ; to retain any hope would be more than foolish, it would be a crime. No trace of injured pride. Rancour, in such circumstances, does not accord either with passion or with a lofty nature.

But as the supreme test of attachment consists in knowing how to detach oneself, she, who had devoted the greater part of her youth and of her solitude to reflecting upon these matters, had felt herself, with the same instantaneity and the same strength, tied to Joseph for life and ready to untie herself, as soon as she found herself a burden to him.

It must be added that she had never before seen a man who was a prey to his calling. These circumstances explain the mortal anguish involved in this renunciation by the feminine creature most charged with vitality that existed on the earth at that moment.

Her visit to the Simlers, the casual glance that this manufacturer's daughter had bestowed upon their rigid and tenacious little factory, had decided everything. She had missed nothing of the encounter overnight. She knew now everything that divided him from herself, and at what cost she would impose herself upon him. In this ferocious act of weighing, she forgot one thing only : this was that between herself and Joseph neither was the distance nor were the obstacles any less than between Joseph and herself. In fact :

" Hélène, by the way," said Julien, with a quite military openness, as they were taking their coffee, after luncheon, " are you aware, my dear girl, that there is a rumour going about the town which is quite absurd and even rather revolting ? I have your authority, I trust, to take a horsewhip to the first lout who utters in my hearing any talk of your marriage to one of those Simlers down there ? "

" I do not suppose that M. Joseph Simler has ever given me a thought," replied Mademoiselle Hélène Le Pleynier. " But in the event of his doing me that honour, I authorise you, simply and solely, to lay before me in private the arguments against his marriage to the daughter of Monsieur Le Pleynier. I should be most interested to hear them."

Having said this, she shut her book and withdrew to her

own room, leaving her brother speechless, and M. Le Pleynier divided between an immoderate joy and a passably discomfited indignation.

II

"LET GO THE ANCHOR," CRIED JONATHAN THE CORSAIR WITH a horrible oath and without taking his eyes off the young Chevalier de Lindet, his lieutenant. "Cut the cable, the schooner will go all the more briskly and your courage also!"

The operation recommended in such forcible terms by the Dutch Pirate found in Justin a reader all the more enthusiastic in that, several years since, the strange vessel upon which the cabin-boy of the Simlers had been sailing the seas, had undergone a similar amputation. The operation was, moreover, quite in order. And although the inclination which, once upon a time, Joseph had felt to cast anchor for ever in a safe haven was now only a distant memory, the habit of cutting cables had survived among the General Staff of the *Nouveaux Etablissements Simler*.

What was there, for that matter, to prevent the whole of the Vendeuvre fleet from following this example? The master-weavers preferred to anchor upon safe bottoms. They were welcome! The Simler schooner put out to sea in all weathers, with equal risk to each of her crew; there was no question of dividing the watches, no one ever left the deck, they had but little sleep, but they did not put to shore until the water came over the gunwale and the laden hull was scraping the sand of the harbour.

In another part of the *Pirate Hollandais*, Jonathan the Corsair made the following statement to the Chevalier, his intrepid but elegant and hypersensitive lieutenant:

"So you wish to return home to marry, youngster? As you please. But you cease from that moment to figure on the list of my crew. Chevalier, I would have thought you

had a stouter heart. A sailor marries only a daughter of the seas, a corsair weds only death. I know you no longer ! "

Was there anything extraordinary in the fact that the *Pirate Hollandais* ceased all of a sudden to interest its reader, from the one-hundred-and-seventy-third of its gilt-edged pages, that is to say, from the moment when, summoned home to the practice of good works by Mademoiselle des Saintes-Lunes, the Chevalier forsook the sea, returning to it only to lead the King's frigates against the corsair, and blow sky high, with blasphemies on their lips, his former companions in evil ?

Justin's fourteen years were prepared to swear that things do not happen, in real life, in so easy or so boring a fashion. He had merely to raise his eyes from his book : outside the window, the buildings of the new spinning-mill were rising in three storeys of brick and immaculate whitewash. If he leaned out a little way, to the left, two hundred yards away, scaffolding and the creaking of winches spoke of additions to the original building. The clipper had made a good chase ; the barque that had set out alone returned as a squadron.

" Justin ! " came a sound of children's voices.

" Utin ! " an infant echoed the sound : kicking feet seemed to expect that they would break in the door. The Chevalier Lindet became decidedly a person not to know. Justin flung the book away and opened the door. Laure, a fine upspringing thistle with dark, anxious eyes, came into the room, followed by a plump little redhead of three, the living image of Elisa, who dragged " Utin" by the sleeve in the direction of a dark courtyard.

" Come and pla-ay with me-e."

A square patch of gravel, surrounded by bay-laurels and jasmines, extended from Pole to Pole, comprising, within an area of fifty square yards, the Old and New Worlds, three or four islands guaranteed desert, the Indian jungle, the African equatorial forest, the Pampas, the Siberian

Steppes, and the boundless rolling Oceans. A gateway—a variant of the Magellan Straits—opened into the adjoining yard of Uncle Joseph and Aunt Elisa. As Aunt Elisa did not approve either of trees, which attract mosquitoes as everyone knows, or of climbing plants which encourage mice, her yard was paved. It represented Civilisation, in terrible proximity to Savagery.

" 'ook at me!" came a triumphant shout from a ruddy, self-confident youngster. He stuck a cocked hat of paper upon his head ; then, with the agility of a cat, a mask transformed the healthy globe of his face into a white surface, pierced by a hole from which protruded a tongue a foot long.

" You'll get caught again," said Justin with an air of annoyance. He seized the cocked hat and tore its folds apart:

" Little . . . fool ! " he cried, as he saw appear, clumsily concealed by the folds, the fateful inscription :

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SIMLER & Cie
A VENDEUVRE

(ANCIENS ETABLISSEMENTS SIMLER, DE BUSCHENDORF, HAUT-RHIN, ET DE VENDEUVRE)

Vendeuvre, les 187

It was forbidden to play with the headed note-paper ; and Justin added to the official taboo his own personal devotion.

Nor was he unaware that those spaces, those horizontal rules, those bold capitals, those romans and italics represented something far more important than a mere order at the lithographer's.

Wo

He could still hear ringing in his ears the " That's all right ! " which Grandpapa Hippolyte had uttered, with the roar of a blacksmith's bellows, one snowy evening, when he made a sudden appearance in the dining-room of the " old house." Neither Justin nor Laure had understood, at first, the import of his " That's all right ! " but its consequences had speedily unrolled themselves before their eyes : Uncle Joseph had come out of the parlour, wild-eyed, purple and perspiring, revealing, through the open door, a shattered Elisa, whose sobs had filled the whole house with a sort of bovine lowing. The stout girl had then flung herself upon Aunt Mina's bosom, upon Hermine's, and lastly, with an even louder lowing, upon Grandmamma Sarah's, circumspect but decided.

The meals at the common table had from that moment shed their lugubrious constraint. The prolonged discussions with the Sterns had ceased. " We are united henceforward in life and death," Afroum had declared, that same evening, at dinner, as he rose to his feet, glass in hand. And, would you believe it, everyone had burst into tears, while Laure failed for breath upon the frenzied bosom of Elisa.

For the next fortnight, Hermine had put on her cloak every afternoon with a curious smile and had gone out in company with her cousin. They would return in the evening, dead tired, but filled to overflowing with tender and exalted sentiments.

At length the family had been invited to judge the result of their explorations. They had wandered, for a whole day, from one to another of a dozen empty houses, and had raised loud cries over certain rusty kitchen ranges while Joseph paced the measurements of the rooms. Now and again he disappeared, and, from the landings came sounds of stifled laughter which could be attributed only to Elisa.

Returning home, they had found Grandpapa, Uncle Myrtil and "those Sterns" bowed over huge sheets of

writing-paper on which the words " *Simler et Cie* " replaced in various styles at the top of the sheet the former heading : " *Etablissements Simler.*"

There was frequent mention, at that time, of a notary, of partnership, of shares and of a limited company. These unfamiliar words passed rumbling round the sumptuous bills of fare which characterised this epoch.

Afterwards, there had been nothing special, until the flitting, except the surprise, one fine evening, as Justin came home from the lycée, of finding a slab of black marble, brand new and brilliantly polished, fastened by four gilt nails to one of the gateposts, and announcing with the gold of its capital letters that lived and laboured :

SIMLER & Cie

ANCIENS ETABLISSEMENTS SIMLER DE BUSCHENDORF (H–R.)

VENDEUVRE ET PARIS

Of the marriage and the flitting, the most striking impressions had been left by the flitting. Of the other survived only the initiation to strawberry ice and the discovery of little baskets of nougat caramel. But when they left the old lodge by the factory, given over now to the grandparents and Uncle Myrtil, to set up their *mezuzzeh* two hundred yards away, in a universe of seven rooms, Justin and Laure had felt the same sensations as Vasco de Gama when he doubled the Cape of Storms.

Shortly after this had begun the first squabbles in the house next door, the series of Elisa's fits of weeping, her outcries when her husband returned from Paris, and their uncle's furious escapes from the house, banging every door behind him. But as these episodes were interspersed with

intervals of a far more delicate nature—days in the country or musical evenings—they ceased to offer any interest to the younger generation.

Elisa was moreover scrupulous in carrying out all the clauses of the contract and abundantly assured the perpetuity of the new firm. Thus there had been conceived and brought into the world, with sickness, fainting fits and crying, but also thanks to a robust appetite and an imperturbable constitution, the shockheaded Hermance and the ruddy package of eight pounds' weight burdened from his birth with the Judeo-Christian label of the names Moïse-Benjamin-Louis.

It need hardly be said that the awakened zeal of the younger generation had not allowed this long series of events to pass without deriving from them a certain philosophy. Thus, the Justin of fourteen, who unfolded the criminal cocked hat with such an air of indignation, had not failed to learn that a board of directors such as that of the Simler factory presupposes the conjunction of numerous circumstances, not the least of which is the inflow of considerable capital. Nor had he failed to observe that the promotion of stout Elisa to the rank of aunt had led to an increased interest on the part of the Sterns in the prosperity of the Simlers.

Torrents of causes and effects, the starting point of which *was not* an irresistible attraction of Uncle Joseph towards his cousin—but the final point of which was : very necessary changes of residence ; an undeniable improvement in their style of living ; finally the purchase, decided in twenty-four hours, of the Huillery factory, buildings and equipment, the transference of the dressing and spinning departments bodily to the new buildings, which had been entirely rebuilt, and an annual turnover exceeding three million francs.

The fourteen-year-old Justin had this additional superiority over the boy that he had once been, of knowing that the

detachment of a countryman of independent means is incompatible with a virile activity. The scream of strident laughter that Cousin Elisa had uttered, before she became *Aunt* Elisa, on the day when Uncle Jos, having taken her for a walk with Justin, had timidly made her visit Passe-Lourdin, asking her what she thought of it, was one of those indications which an attentive mind does not overlook. This experience had marked the end of Passe-Lourdin, the end also of the nephew's walks with his uncle.

The third-form schoolboy could not help laughing when he thought of a kid in champagne-coloured silk socks, who used to dream in Yiddish and lost his head at the sight of a patch of grass among laurel-bushes and pines.

More than one other habit had been quick in making a similar change. Placed in juxtaposition to Hermine, a languishing but pitiless housewife, Elisa had found the part of pretty woman vacant and had seized upon it. Her constant pregnancies and her fits of jealous rage served only to make her tyranny more delicious. Nor had she failed, immediately upon her promotion to the rank of " aunt," to declare, one evening, that nothing made her more miserable than the sound of a flute.

The instrument had been silenced for ever, that evening.

The virtue of experience had in this way completed and, profitably reorganised, in Justin, the store of knowledge with which the first ten years of his life had already burdened him.

As he was not in any sense of the word a genuine Simler, he did not despise, when he measured it by the standard of his own, his elders' capacity for work. If then one had seen Joseph's absences in Paris extend by gradual degrees beyond what mere business transactions required, all that this meant was, and it was as clear as daylight, that man must eat of the fruits of the tree that he has planted ; and that, if he does

not find them in one place, he must go and seek for them in another.

And who would have ventured to assert that Elisa's peevish outbursts compose the ideal life with which a man of Joseph's temper should be satisfied, after a fortnight of back-breaking toil?

Just as they please, on their own little plot of ground, beneath their group of family portraits, let the former occupants of a broken-down little factory, take in the rest of the world with their impertinent poses. Justin looked down, from his second-floor window, upon the crumbling ruins of the Le Pleynier mills. He knew that the Simlers would buy them in, whenever they needed that plot of ground to build their stables.

They would buy in many other things as well, now that they had started to ride roughshod over Vendeuvre. And who would have ventured to assert, in the hearing of the Justin Simler of 1876, that similar prospects do not justify a man in enduring, with a light heart, certain situations such as that of which Elisa was the living image?

There is only one law, that of finishing ahead of everyone else, and of being, in every place and by every means, the best man! Then the world becomes inexhaustibly prodigal of its joys, and life is worth living.

Justin applied these conclusions instinctively, long before he astonished the "beak" of the third form by putting them, in Latin verse, in the mouth of the rebuked Coriolanus.

The precocious awakening of this half-oriental intelligence, sustained by that insatiable thirst for knowledge, which is a mark of his race, was upsetting the time-honoured routine of the Normal School. The lycée of Vendeuvre watched this phenomenon grow with a thrill of anxious pride. The Former Pupils' Association thought of founding a prize which young Simler would inaugurate upon passing out of the Rhetoric class.

" What are we playing ? " Laure and Hermance had already begun to ask, taking from his hands Louis's crumpled cocked hat.

It was, therefore, with entire sincérity, with an impeccable secret logic, that the future Justin Simler, of Simler & Co., replied, as he placed four iron chairs in a row in front of him, and went to fetch a little garden table : " I am a lecturer, you are my audience. I am going to speak to you, ahem ! I am going to speak to you about the True, the Beautiful and the Good."

III

When you have learned to take down and assemble the breech of a piece of artillery, when you possess the formula of the explosive, when you have weighed the shell in your hand and explored its surface with your fingers, you know so much that you will have little more to learn on the range itself.

So it was with the Simler family. As soon as their fourfold energy had been brought into play, then, conditions remaining normal, their results were in slavish conformity with their anticipations.

Consequently, a detailed account of the fifty months that followed the winter of 1872–73 is not worth giving, until the day when fate once again asked for a slice of the pie.

If they did literally, during this period, eat their bread in the sweat of their brows, they did not for that reason curse the hour in which they were born, nor did they break out, seven times daily, in lamentations upon original sin. Hard work was the marrow of their bones. Each week contained, in its fullness, the ration of effort, ambition and achievement which natures such as theirs require.

It would be false, however, to pretend that they omitted to thank One Who was outside themselves ; these men, who

supposed themselves to adore the God Without Form or Feature of their forebears, rendered thanks in reality to the God of Iron and Wool whom they served from morning to night.

Ever since the day when, substituting themselves for the original creditors, the Sterns had repaid themselves with shares in the new Company, Limited, while, as a make-weight, Elisa's dowry had remained invested in their business in Paris, Vendeuvre had begun to torment itself, not without reason. The West understood nothing of the industrial mechanism of which these Alsatians were furnishing it with a first example.

" I find that I have a few sous in my safe," M. Lorilleux—inspired by the devil—confided one day to M. Hippolyte in an indifferent tone. " They tell me of a nice piece of property in the Melle direction. Humph ! If you know of any investments you can recommend, you must know all about that sort of thing, I would rather, ahem !, yes, I should prefer."

M. Hippolyte could not contain himself : " Investments ? A property ? And you are a spinner ? Buy new machines, Monsieur Lorilleux, buy warping-plant, buy new cards, there is your property, there are your investments ! "

" The old Jew, there's no getting anything out of him," said M. Lorilleux that night to his wife. He resigned himself to seeking unaided a profitable use for his savings, and finally entrusted them, like a wise man, to the enlightened care of the *Union Générale.*

" They are as-tounding, as-tounding," said M. Hippolyte, without offering any further explanation. But his eyes flashed fire as they followed the lines of his building. To tell the truth, so far from taking money out of it as fast as it accumulated, the Simler method was quite the contrary. And Joseph, if he had been questioned, and had delved a little way down in his memory, Joseph would have been able to furnish interesting information as to the nature of the mortar

that they did not hesitate to use, when the solidity of the foundations required it.

And yet, three months later, fate, which never does anything without planning a sequel, brought face to face that little rascal Lorilleux and his highly redoubtable colleague of the Boulevard du Grand Cerf. This was on the Place d'Armes, from which everything starts and to which everything returns. Vendeuvre was passing from politeness to precaution, now that the Simlers were becoming, without any possible doubt, people of means.

" My dear Sir, will you despise me utterly ? I have not followed your advice. I have placed *it* in the bank."

" Ah ? A-ha ? " the chief of the Simlers repeated more slowly ; he dilated the bloodshot kernels of his pupils to examine the speaker more closely. " Hah ? Well, Monsieur Lorilleux, perhaps you have not been wrong."

" So that's all ! " thought Lorilleux as he left him. " I thought as much."

" Lorilleux ! " shouted the terrace of the Café de l'Europe, " come and have a glass of something and tell us what the Hippopotamus was whispering to you."

" Gentlemen, listen to what I am about to tell you, if you have ears, and try to understand it, if you have brains. Either the Simlers have a nest-egg in the bank, in which case they are downright liars, but we have only to pack up our traps and make way for them. Or else they have sunk everything in their business, and they're scuppered."

The terrace received this information with the mistrust that was enjoined by M. Lorilleux's character and the nature of his revelation.

" That's all very well ! Give us proofs ! " cried Nicouleaux, the deputy mayor.

" Will you be so kind as to take a look at that back, and tell me if it is what you consider a triumphant back ? "

The terrace pivoted upon its collective buttocks and

gazed after the retreating shoulders and back of M. Hippolyte.

" Indisputable," growled the chorus.

" Since when have we seen any of the Simlers outside his den on any day but Sunday ? Not that Pommier and I care a rap," added the benevolent gentleman. " We are spinners, your troubles are not ours. *We* shall continue to spin. If Vendeuvre ceases to buy from us, Sedan, Louviers, Elbeuf, Roubaix, or the devil will buy from us. As for black cloth, you must make up your minds, it is no longer wanted except for hearses. My opinion is that the trade is done for."

" Fut ! Done for," Boulinier sententiously confirmed.

" Listen to Boulinier. He ought to know something about it."

" I do know something about it, tsch, tsch ! Let those who can produce an honourable balance-sheet do so, and realise their assets."

" Oho ! When the rats leave the ship, there is nothing left for the crew but to take to the boats."

" Safety first, gentlemen, precisely. If you care to know, for the last six months I have neither taken an order nor passed one on. In a week's time, I shall not have enough stuff in my warehouse to feed a mite, and I shall go off to begin the fishing-season at my son-in-law's. Pfft, tk, tk ! Excellent place to sublet. Any offers ? "

Their *apéritif* swallowed, and, this time, ill digested, the gentlemen climbed heavily to the terrace outside the station. The first call of the sirens found them still leaning there, on the brown gate, uttering isolated reflections as to the smokeless chimneys, Marshal MacMahon and the uncertainty of the times.

It was a fact that the activities of the factories of Lyons, the invasion of English " novelty " goods, and the decrees of Parisian tailors, bringing into fashion foulards, silks, light-coloured cloths, and, for children, " Scotch tartans," had

recently overthrown the thirty-year-old hegemony of the manufacture of black stuffs.

Now this was the only shot that Vendeuvre had in its locker. And the Simlers were no wiser, in this respect, than their rivals.

Ended, the daily Pactolus of the mails. The French middle classes had suddenly discarded the black frock-coat of M. Guizot. After six years of deep mourning, the women of France felt that they had done sufficient honour to ill-starred courage. And it is not materially possible to create a turnover of three millions out of clergymen's cassocks.

" In less than six months from now, Morindet, Sabouret, Pommier and myself will be the only people still going," that rascal Lorilleux declaimed on the terrace outside the station, before a silent audience of two dozen bondholders, officials and tradesmen. " Within six months, pfft ! finished, Vendeuvre ! Finished the *Vendeuvre cloth.* The Jews, like everyone else, all in a heap. Listen to me, gentlemen, you will be able to say, one day : ' I was there, the evening when Lorilleux prophesied the ruin of Vendeuvre.' In the meantime, if you don't wish us to fall into the hands of incendiaries and communists, vote for the Marshal, and up with any party, rather than this rotten Republic ! "

Meanwhile, M. Hippolyte, who had come out by himself, this Friday evening, returned, about five o'clock, with a rolling gait, to the white walls of the Grand Cerf. His meeting with the rascal had upset him, and he was awaiting, with something more than impatience, the return of Joseph, who had gone to Paris.

" Well ? " inquired the eyes and lips of M. Hippolyte, of Myrtil, of Guillaume and of Uncle Wilhelm, when Joseph entered the warehouse. They had been pacing its floor for the last two hours.

" There's nothing doing. Paris will be under the Commune before May, and if anything sells then it will be silk, amazone

and novelty goods. How many machines are at work in the spinning-room ? "

" Six."

" And in the weaving ? "

" Nine."

" Hum ! And we have a fortnight's work still before us."

Oaths do not solve problems, but they clear the air, and give time for reflection. M. Hippolyte, in this case, had all the time that he required. Joseph went on : " My father-in-law made no secret of the fact that they are looking everywhere for what they want. Afroum has gone down to Balzan's. He is to go on as far as Vienne in the Isère, and perhaps, on his way home, visit England, going by Elbeuf and Louviers. They are very sorry, but there is nothing they can do now with black stuffs, or with us."

" What did they advise ? "

" Do people give advice when they are in the cart themselves ? "

" You didn't discuss, consider . . ."

" Consider ? One always considers. It is easier than finding a solution."

" And you found nothing ? "

" And you, here ? "

" You shall hear . . . we have thought . . ."

" Good, but let us dine first."

" First ? "

" I am as hungry as a hunter, and it is impossible to talk sense on an empty stomach."

The *Shabbesabend* had brought the whole clan together in what had once been their common dwelling. Dinner was eaten in silence. When the boiled beef came, Hippolyte pushed his plate away. " Ach, I can't swallow it ! " and, resting his elbows on the table, he buried his face in his hands. Elisa decided that the moment had come for her to burst into sobs. Hermine and her mother-in-law exchanged glances.

Joseph ate ravenously. Guillaume picked at his plate, as was his dyspeptic habit. The children dared not breathe. Before Fanny, the Alsatian maid, had cleared the table, M. Hippolyte rose massively to his feet :

" To-morrow ! To-morrow ! I need to—think still. To-morrow ! "

And he went out, into the night.

A cloth factory is a singularly nervous animal, for it participates, as metaphysicians say, in all the modalities of time. One year's work is dovetailed into another year ; the cloth that your tailor buys for your winter greatcoat was ordered eighteen months ago, and woven the winter before that. So that if the season has been a failure, and if the cloth has remained on the shelves, it will be a year before the blow reaches the weaving-mills and stabs them in the back. But long before the list of orders in execution is exhausted, apprehension of the future will have slipped along the driving-bands. A curious languor will have invaded the weaving-rooms, and before the first pucker of his brow has betrayed the employer's anxiety, the humblest ragamuffin who pushes a trolley of shuttles will have heard it said that it will be prudent to start looking for work for the following season.

If you add that weaving does not enjoy any privilege over other industries, that it vibrates like them at the least shock of political electricity, and at the slightest variations which affect the maintenance of human life, you will agree that it is difficult to imagine a more sensitive indicator, provided always that you are in a position to read its indications.

The thing had caught the Simler factory early in the current autumn. An insistent, almost mild discomfort, like those hardened tumours which lodge between skin and flesh, roll about under the finger, seem a mere nothing, and turn the heart sick as soon as they are touched.

The young people had at first felt nothing. But in the first days of October, 1876, the oldest workers had cocked their ears at the sound that came from the shops, and said : " Things are not going to recover, this season."

Taking them all in all, many had worked for other employers until their shutters went up. They knew how these calamities are heralded.

This state of things had then dragged on for three months, without growing worse. Confidence revived. But the elders were obdurate : " There has been no sign of a recovery so far ; we must wait until the spring now to see."

It was not that the firm had thanked a comrade for his services or stopped a single loom. The factory was working at full tilt, and M. Joseph, that admirable merchant, continued his regular goings and comings between Vendeuvre and Paris.

But the distemper was universal. The factories no longer concealed the difficulty of carrying on until the last days of winter. Elsewhere, looms were stopping one after another. The unemployed comrades began to haunt the canal bank, in the hope of finding a barge to unload or picking up a hint from one of the strangers who landed there.

The first weeks of April had come, and, for the second time, the recovery had not occurred. The winter had been mild with a heavy rainfall. Rumours of revolution were muttered round Paris. Gambetta was touring the country, his mouth inflated with republican wrath. War with Prussia was possible. Money had gone into hiding.

M. Joseph was increasing the frequency of his journeys, and that was not a good sign. You could see in it the anxiety of the cattle who smell the fire in their byre and dash their horns against the door. Pailloux knew that the engine was having less and less strain put upon it. Two weeks more, and the consumption of coal would have diminished by one half. Some looms were working eight hours only, others six, and the weavers asked themselves each morning whether

this was the day on which would begin, as at Lefombère's, as at Lorilleux's, the foremen's rounds : " Momot, Laroq, Bodin, Monsieur Guillaume would like to speak to you before you go."

Finally a terrible thunderbolt had fallen : black cloth will not be worn any more, the black industry is dead ! And courage had deserted the factories of Vendeuvre.

Sarah, that evening, waited for her husband until after eleven o'clock. Little Blum, Babette and Myrtil had kept her company, after the children had gone home. But when, by her side, his belly pressed against the mattress and his face buried in the pillow, notwithstanding his asthma, her man had at length managed to go to sleep, she could at her leisure weigh the horror of the present in the scales of the past.

She saw first of all a little white building overshadowed by chestnut trees, scarcely larger than a shed. Its sound mingled with the sounds of the kitchen. Its rhythm was domestic. It entered into everyday life like the care of a pair of cows, a horse and a nanny-goat. An hour's work would have sufficed to draw up the balance-sheet, and two months' savings would have paid every debt.

Then the sound of galloping hooves on the road, two sharp raps of the knocker, an order in a language neither French nor Alsatian, and the creak of leather made by a cavalry patrol in the act of dismounting.

. . . Autumn rains, the memory of damp, disheartening hours, in which eight people huddle together in the mire of a wretched porter's lodge, beneath the menace of a tall, foreign factory, treeless, blind and dead. Slow openings of doors, futile comings and goings, agonies, weariness, plans altered a hundred times, quarrels, reconciliations, and heavy crushing silences between man and man.

And then one morning something begins to stir underground and makes the whole place shake : a grinding sound,

and so alien, like everything else ; the factory begins to move, life starts afresh.

Month follows month into the past. Hope that had at first been suspended from each of the family like a bat hanging from a curtain-rod, makes a violent effort and succeeds in acquiring speed. Apprehension of the quarterly return spans the months. It completes the year, and the moment arrives when—Joseph having been rescued from the *goy* viper—the Stern money comes flooding into the veins of the factory. Wagons bring fresh looms and machinery. The roar increases. The family home, which originally regulated everything else according to its own rhythm, is no more now than a plank tossed upon the waves. A mighty din overwhelms the universe. The urgency of the common safety requires that it shall not cease nor diminish for a single instant.

And this is the very hour in which the attentive ear surprises, one day, the first sign of faltering. Neither husband nor sons have as yet said a word. But instinct is alert. And, for the last six months, the old woman has felt that the huge body is being drained of its vigour.

O Weh ! That such a struggle should end simply in fresh fears.

She knows too well that the day of reckoning which approaches will be the last. The man who is sleeping by her side, and whose asthma is whistling from his chest, has lived long enough. She knows that he finds it difficult to raise his left eyelid. His strength has given all that it had to give. It is escaping by the same channels as the strength of the factory. But his will not return again.

O Weh ! The old woman sits up in bed, in the darkness of the night, draws her nightlight nearer, straightens her white nightcap over her hair, folds her shawl over her shoulders, takes her spectacles from their case, opens the Book, and her lips begin to quiver over the crabbed type and the imperishable words.

The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer. . . .

I will call upon the Lord ; . . . so shall I be saved from mine enemies.

The sorrows of death compassed me, and the floods of ungodly men made me afraid.

The sorrows of hell compassed me about ; the snares of death prevented me.

In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried unto my God : he heard my voice out of his temple, and my cry came before him, even into his ears. . . .

Have mercy upon me, O God, have mercy upon me, for my soul cleaveth unto thee.

IV

On the morning that followed, the workers received a clue to the fate that was in store for them. Guillaume's face was installed by the gate, suggesting by its colour a burnt-out cresset hanging from a wire. And when the partners, abandoning the workrooms in turn, had assembled in the warehouse, the foremen tried in vain to assume an authority which they no longer felt themselves to possess.

Little Uncle Wilhelm, who had been rescued on the very brink of disaster, was understudying Joseph. His club-foot sprang from rung to rung of the ladders. And so there were five of them, that morning,—he hanging back a little behind the other four—when Hippolyte, rising to his feet, and inadvertently keeping his silk hat on his head, as though in the synagogue, opened the meeting :

" I do not think that there is very much to be said, and it is better so. Business is going down. Black cloth has ceased to sell. It will be a matter of ten or fifteen years before that line comes into favour again, if it ever does. You know this

as well as I ; everybody in France knows it this morning. We have not the means, we have not the patience to wait ten or fifteen years—is not that so ? "

This " is not that so ? " sought neither answer nor approbation. M. Hippolyte looked at each of his audience and went on : " To persevere, with a plant like ours, would be madness. Ruin, within two years. I would not have consented to do so when my money alone and Myrtil's was in the business. There can be no suggestion of such a thing now."

" Rrrrm ! " came from Myrtil's throat. His brother cast a curious glance at him.

" And so, this is what I have decided to propose to you. We are going to liquidate."

And as the group of his four listeners quivered, he repeated, in a louder tone, turning livid, while his left hand assisted his eyelid to rise over the bloodshot hemisphere of his eye :

" I have said : we are going to liquidate. By working for three years with one quarter of our plant, we shall be able to pay off our debt. When that time comes, we shall stop work altogether, and the factory will be so-old."

Myrtil could be heard grinding his teeth.

" From to-day, Myrtil and I intend to retire. Guillaume and Joseph are capable of managing the business. And if the liquidation is carried out on the conditions which I anticipate, I shall buy them, when the time comes, a place on the stock exchange, in Paris. So ! "

As no one made any response, he added almost at once, letting his eyelid droop again, and flushing from his dewlap to the back of his neck :

" I shall confine myself to stating this one fact, that I am now about to retire from business, in eighteen hundred and seventy-seven, a poorer man than I was in the year seventy. But—as everyone has done his duty—since then—I shall

reproach no one, nor shall I speak of the matter again. The Lord hath given, the Lord hath taken away, blessed be His Holy Name."

He raised his enormous hand, and this strange man was seen to smile. There occurred also an unforeseen incident. His hand having come in contact with the brim of his hat, he realised that he was wearing it ; his smile vanished, he banged his hat down upon the table and, knitting his brows, glared at his sons with an expression of unbounded scorn.

They had followed his movements with a hypnotised stare. They opened their mouths to utter the same word : " Unthinkable ! "

" What ? "

" Unthinkable," Joseph repeated with greater emphasis.

" Leave the factory ? " muttered Guillaume's safety-valve, " unthinkable, Papa ! "

Of all the speeches that people had composed, in the course of their lives, with the intention of flattering Hippolyte, none had ever proved so successful as this. And so he was beside himself when he responded : " You see, Myrtil, what they think of us ? "

Myrtil immediately posed as the statue of outraged dignity. Joseph took the bit in his teeth : " Extreme solutions are all very well for doing things, not for undoing them. Will you allow me to speak ? I have talked to the Sterns, as you know. And the two of us, Guillaume and I, have perhaps a stake in the business."

The Hippopotamus turned away with a grunt, and made a gesture which Joseph was free to interpret as he chose. But his response was to express his opinion briefly : " Black cloth is no longer selling ? Very well. Let us make coloured cloth. And if Amazone[1] is not enough, let us turn out Nouveauté."

Hippolyte turned quickly, and Myrtil rose to his full

[1] A patternless cloth, black or coloured.

height. As for Guillaume, he had formed no plan save that of a desperate struggle to retain the ground already won. The thought of carrying the war into the enemy's country made him livid :

" Madness ! I did not think you were such a fool," replied the Hippopotamus, as soon as he was capable of speech.

" And why should not we turn out as good stuff as Balzan, the people at Roubaix or the English ? "

" There is no why about it. It is not our line."

" It will become our line."

" I don't know how to make it."

" We shall learn."

" I refuse to risk everything at one stroke."

" Very well, but we must take risks. Wilhelm and I are young, and as for your idea of turning us into brokers, you need not give it another thought."

" In other words, you mean to turn us out of doors, the pair of you ? " growled M. Hippolyte, retrieving his hat and looking at his brother.

" Who was it that spoke of retiring ? " inquired Guillaume, who was beginning to recover. Joseph's plan deserves consideration, and the whole lot of us would not be too many for . . . "

" Stern spoke to you of this ? "

" Stern," Joseph went on, " will buy the half of our output in coloured cloth and Nouveauté for two years, on trial."

" No. I do not know how to make it ! " M. Hippolyte cried once again. Joseph flung upon the table a score of many-coloured samples :

" Is it difficult to make, this sort of thing ? Pooh ? "

Anyone who saw the other four bend over these crumpled scraps of cloth would have made more than one discovery. There was a silence broken by the sound of heavy breathing, in the course of which eager fingers felt, pulled, plucked, scrutinising the cloth thread by thread, wresting the secret of

this rival manufacture from the intersection of warp and woof.

" Serge," breathed Myrtil as he stretched a deep blue sample over the back of his thumb.

" Well, O weavers, have you seen all that there is to see ? Is it too hard a task for you ? "

" And the dyeing ? " growled Myrtil, looking at Joseph as he might have looked at some slightly repulsive specimen in a museum.

" There are dyers."

" That isn't going to be the most difficult part," murmured the little uncle. M. Hippolyte raised his head at once and turned towards his brother-in-law :

" What would you do, now, if you were in my shoes ? "

" I should trust *them*," Blum replied quietly.

Hippolyte seemed angry : " I thought as much ! "

And to himself he muttered : " *Lorrain, fils de chien, âpre au gain . . .* "

" Come then," exclaimed Joseph, as he banged the table with his hand and sent the heap of samples flying, " keep the black trade for yourselves, let Guillaume and me seek our fortune. If, in two years from now, we have not made four millions, call me an idiot."

" You mean plain stuffs only ? " his father was beginning to waver.

" I mean anything and everything that we have to take up in order to extricate ourselves and not to become money-changers and usurers, Papa."

" If they imagine that we are going to sit tight on Amazone like a cow on her dung ! " Joseph said to his brother as he shut the door on the old men. " This is not the time to stop half-way. It is everything or nothing. As Papa said, this morning the whole of France knows it. There are three hundred firms discussing, at this very moment, what line they are going to take. Fifty of them will decide upon taking the

plunge. Of those fifty, ten will prove successful. We must be one of the ten. The market will go to those that are ready soonest. You'll admit I carried it through pretty well, Guillaume ! Were you expecting anything of the sort, old man ? "

A stream of warm blood gave fresh youth to Guillaume's sallow cheeks. And little Uncle Blum, if he was not the most rational of the three, was not to be disregarded as an adviser in the elaboration of the plan.

The factory had seen the two senior partners come out of the warehouse. Their anxious and embarrassed expression had not augured any good. M. Hippolyte withdrew at the earliest possible moment, and went to shut himself up with his wife. The whole of Vendeuvre knew, when the midday break came, that the Simlers were no cleverer than anyone else, and that all must be prepared to suffer alike.

There followed nevertheless three full days of discussion before Hippolyte would surrender, three days which Elisa employed to the best of her ability in alternating between scenes of love-swooning in Joseph's arms, and paroxysms of sobbing in Hermine's. As for Justin, he was wasting away with emotion.

Jacob Stern came down to Vendeuvre in person and returned to Paris. The period of secret deliberations began again. Bands of people began to spring from the ground, their hands in their pockets and starvation in their eyes. One heard of difficulties in the Banque de l'Ouest, and the 363[1] were accused of vicious practices the mere enumeration of which would have astonished them greatly.

When the town omnibus called for Joseph, one morning, there were as many tears shed as in the good old days. Joseph was not allowed to start until he had been duly

[1] Is it necessary to remind the French reader of to-day that the reference is to the 363 Republican Gambettist Deputies, whose re-election by ballot put an end to the crisis of May 16 and impelled Marshal MacMahon, the President of the Republic, to resign ?

gebenscht. For the second time, the fortune of the Simlers was sent out into the highways.

Guillaume was prowling in the background, gnawing his moustaches. It never entered his head that the operation could be effective without him. He seized an opportunity to approach his brother : " You are sure that I can't help you in any way ? " he said in a voice rendered sombre by anxiety on his own account and by the general depression.

" You would be most useful to me, Wilhelm. But one of us is indispensable here ; the old people have lost their heads."

Joseph's fingers slid over a hand prematurely cased in parchment, and expressing all that he left unsaid.

The wheels had not bumped for more than a quarter of a mile over the cobbles when Joseph sprang from the omnibus. " Stop ! "

" Monsieur Hector has not come down yet," said the porter, summoned by his imperious tug at the bell. " But if Monsieur Joseph . . . "

M. Joseph had cleared the outer steps in a stride, and was covering the thick felt carpet on the staircase four steps at a time. The door was familiar ; he turned the handle with entire candour of heart :

" Hector, my dear fellow . . . "

Hector Lefombère was sitting there, motionless, his bare legs dangling from the bed, lost in a strange contemplation : his right arm bent, the elbow pressed to his side, the forearm horizontally extended, he was carefully studying the movements of the hand that protruded from the sleeve of his nightshirt.

He raised for an instant, without any trace of surprise, his regular, equine face, and relapsed into his scrutiny : " Yours doesn't shake ? "

Joseph remained breathless and bewildered.

" It doesn't shake ? You may count yourself fortunate, my

friend. Just look at this rag. For the last half-hour I've been trying, by concentrating my will, to keep it m-m-motionless. It is like a bunch of dates. I'm finished, my dear fellow."

The hand, a shapely hand, white and tapering, was indeed quivering in its cuff, with a motion that was barely perceptible, but never ceased and must soon become intolerable.

" Aha ! That is because you are not a Lefombère ! Blue blood. Half-blue blood. Look at this little tremor. D'you see ? Very well, I might offer all the money in Vendeuvre, this morning, nobody could make it stop. I am healthy, never any disease, don't touch spirits, have taken care of myself since I left school like a little old man, simply to end in this. My father used to go on the razzle with Barbey d'Aurévilly, and my grandfather was the biggest fop in the Bodyguard. Ah ! The grandson may well be proud. Look, look ! Curious, isn't it ? And yours doesn't shake ? You have only Simler blood in your veins."

He had not raised his eyes again to Joseph's face, but was keeping them fixed upon his own hand. Joseph made as though to feel his own wrist, but felt ashamed, and thrust his hand into the pocket of his greatcoat.

" Hector, Hector, old man, forget about all that. Everybody's hand has been shaky at some time in his life. You have been going the pace."

" Word of honour," cried young Lefombère, looking him frankly in the face, this time. " Never, not since . . . you remember."

Joseph blushed.

" Yes. Still, this little tremor is not going to prevent you from living to a hundred and making the most of life. My father's hand shakes like . . . "

" It didn't shake when he was twenty-eight."

" Possibly not, but it's a hand that will make old bones, I can promise you. Get up every morning at five o'clock, and

saw half a cord of wood before you go to business. In a month's time you'll have forgotten all about it."

Hector shrugged his shoulders, and at once began to whine : " Then you don't know what it means, this little signal ? You know nothing at all ? It means a padded cell or a wheeled chair in ten years' time, and an attendant in uniform to wipe my mouth. There's the pox of my dandy forebears in that, the swell parties of the Restoration, the dances at Sceaux and the rich dinners of the Second Empire. I'm washed out," he added, growing a little calmer. " Bah, don't let us think any more about it. It is unpleasant. But who will remember it in a hundred years ? Sit down, my dear fellow. I have been keeping you on your feet. And tell me what good wind brings you here at this unusual hour ? "

He rose and took Joseph's arm, held it in a friendly grip, and pointed to a chair. Apart from his being attired in the most ridiculous costume in which a son of Adam can display himself, his two knees and his two long legs, coated with golden hairs, emerging from the ample skirts of a nightshirt, the affability of his manners would have done credit to the most exacting drawing-room.

" I shall not sit down. Thank you. I called . . . I see now that it was not the right moment."

" What a strange man. Sit down over there, and speak."

" Only a moment, then. My steed is champing at the door."

" You are going away ? On a Monday morning ? "

" Yes. To London."

" What nonsense ! "

" Are you quite calm ? Very well, then, I am going to tell you a secret. . . . This is between you and me and no one else, here or anywhere : Vendeuvre is finished."

" That is news, to be sure."

" Good. Wait a moment : we are changing our line of business."

" Indeed ? . . . A-ha ! . . . Excellent. You are quite right.

You are the same as ever. There was nothing else to be done. Still, it required the power to do it."

"The will."

"Precisely."

"Listen, my dear fellow, let us come to the point. This air of detachment bores me and . . . frightens me. As my old man says : 'I don't know what to make of it.' I called here to tell you that I am leaving for England, that we want to try and get ourselves out of the mess. That can only be done by trying coloured goods, Nouveauté, the devil and all his angels. I am going to make a little collection of English samples, get hold of an individual who knows his job to set the looms, and do everything that the situation may require. Do you care to come in? There is room for two, and . . . and I don't like to see you go under."

Hector Lefombère rose.

"My dear old Simler, you are better than the finest gentleman in the world. As for discretion, don't alarm yourself. I shall think of it always, and shall never say a word. Seriously, go to London, don't worry any more about us."

Joseph did not know whether it was the moment to be sorry or indignant.

"You are raving!"

"Not at all. It is quite simple, and you will understand in a moment. You people are young . . ."

"Young?" exclaimed Joseph, summing up his slim junior in a comprehensive glance.

"Yes, my dear fellow, all *young*, extremely *young*, old Simler just as young as yourself, and the man with the face like a crimson shutter—heaven forbid that I should ever forget it—is as young as your brother, the gloomy Guillaume. You are seeking your fortune. You are quite right. No joking, it is an admirable spectacle. Carry on, so long as your side of the wheel is uppermost. In fact, you have

every reason to make haste. You can't tell how much time you have before you. The wheel keeps turning. But unquestionably your turn has come. Only don't burden yourselves with us. The same causes do not produce the same effects here as with you. People talk nonsense when they say that a flea the size of a man could jump over the towers of Notre-Dame. A flea the size of you or me could not jump three feet, and would sweat at that. There are a state and a moment in which bodies give out their maximum of energy. When that state and that moment have passed, everything grows feeble. That is what is happening with us, and with the rest of our neighbours. For a century now, half a century at least, we have been spending all the money that we have made, and sometimes more. You have seen my hand, too. I don't press the point. And I am the only male of the younger generation, my dear fellow. Two of my sisters wish to become nuns. Tne third is not the type that people marry without a dowry. You have no idea of the exquisite refinement of their feelings. It is the fine flower of civilisation. But that has nothing to do with free competition in business. My governor was the biggest dandy of the forties. Even if he has grown as glum and solemn as a nightcap, he is still the greatest idealist of the present day. You don't know him. His business formulas are in the same grand manner as his way of lifting his hat, and he clings to his old looms as he does to his pocket Montaigne. The place was rebuilt, after the fire, exactly from the original plans, and we bump our heads in exactly the same dear old dark corners. Don't you say a word to him about changing his line. He would listen to all you had to say with the utmost politeness, and would consider you the most dangerous man he had ever met in his life."

" But, great God in heaven," exclaimed Joseph, adjusting his spectacles, " you are in the business too ! "

" I ? By the way, it would be just as well if I put on a pair

of drawers, don't you think? I? I'm good for fifteen years more, if I take care of myself, more probably for ten, and between now and then, an uncontrollable dread of any confusion, of any worry. Frankly, am I the man to do single-handed what you are going to do as a quartet, and a quartet of Simlers?"

"Your subordinates . . ." Joseph began in a less trenchant tone. The Lefombère factory maintained a hierarchy of officials almost as numerous as that of a Government Department.

"Since when have we done anything *with* those people, and not *against them*? Let us sink quietly and peacefully dragging one another down. My father will see nothing of what is happening, and will have the satisfaction of blaming the Republic for all the mischief. As for me, I am rich enough to end my life respectably, which is more than I should be able to do if I remained in business. Besides, we are invited to tea at Le Plantis this afternoon. . . . Goodbye, old man, it is nearly seven, off with you, and good luck."

V

JOSEPH'S LUCK WAS GOOD. AND HIS SPIRITS WOULD HAVE BEEN as good or better, had not the unpleasant reminder of Le Plantis spoiled the first day of his travels.

There are certain things which a man of feeling cannot recall with impunity. Joseph spent this day asking himself whether, like Rodrigue in the play, he had a heart, and finding that he was unable to answer a question so ill expressed he reviled himself as a brute, an ignoble brute, shrinking back into a corner of the blue upholstery of the train and pulling his cap down over his eyes.

But the equivocal and still novel charms of Gustave Droz, not to mention the excitement of the crossing to Newhaven,

were sufficient to arouse in him a new spirit, to which the world was still a vast assemblage of marvels.

Once in England, all trace of him is lost. He himself never referred to this period save with an infinity of reticences and restrained mirth. It is certain that he penetrated as far as Leeds and even Manchester, that he did not always travel first-class, that he did not exclusively haunt the big hotels, but that with the complicity of a manufacturer of machinery at Newcastle, assuming the style and title of Herr Mitmacher, a German machine-fitter, he forced the doors of several large weaving-mills and inspected them minutely. It is no less certain that his entire ignorance of the English language does not seem to have stood in the way of his forming a numerous acquaintance ; that he found his way into many a bar with many different companions ; that having, on one occasion, entered a little wine-shop at Tottenham with a person who moved with the gait of a commercial traveller, he emerged from it a little later bearing a respectable package under his arm and an air of complete satisfaction on his face.

It remains to be recorded that he had the pleasure, as he was on his way back to Vendeuvre, of falling quite by chance, on the quay at Boulogne, into the arms of his uncle by marriage, Afroum Stern. What he said and showed to that respected merchant, who was crossing to Folkestone, was of the greatest possible interest to him.

Six days later, three large valises, two of which, quite new, bore the mark of the Army and Navy Stores, were making the tables in the warehouse groan. When he opened them, they proved to be filled with little scraps of cloth of all colours, some mounted on cards, some bound up in little books. Joseph's pocket-book, when he condescended to produce it, was no less fertile in surprises. Thirty pages were covered with his close little curling script. The reading of these notes occupied two whole days, during which a storm

was brewing, if one was to judge by the shouts of M. Hippolyte, but by the end of which the rumour began to spread through Vendeuvre that the Simlers were not closing down, and that the whole place was being overhauled from top to bottom.

As a matter of fact, cards of samples, so long as they are in their first freshness, are not made an object of public discussion. For it need not be said that an attentive scrutiny of them is tantamount to an exploration of our neighbour's secrets and enables persons of intelligence to draw extremely rapid conclusions. Weavers know this and protect themselves. But try if you can prevent the human conscience from succumbing to punch, whisky, and other arguments as well !

A week later, there arrived a strange comrade, hermetic and extremely curt, whom Joseph went to meet at the station with every mark of respect, but who was immediately shut up in a little room used for treating raw wool, which had been hastily cleared of its contents. Joseph and Guillaume spent more than one day there discussing matters. M. Hippolyte and Myrtil called there more frequently than might have been expected. Then Zeller, Uncle Blum and two or three others were invited to attend.

An hour's leisure was allowed the new comrade every morning and evening. He would spend this time smoking a short pipe on the canal bank, a cap on his head, with an air of complete indifference to everything within sight or hearing. He had ascertained, on the day of his arrival, the non-existence of any kind of bar in this primitive country. His personal curiosity extending no farther, he had uttered an " oh ! " and the sound of his voice had not been heard again.

Fanny carried his meals to him in the room in which he slept. Justin, who had slipped into the room on her heels, came upon a pair of handlooms, of ridiculously inadequate

breadth but of abnormal height, enclosed in frames of heavy wooden beams ; the threads of the warp passed through a series of holes in cards ruled with squared lines ; the whole thing appeared barbaric and rudimentary. He was to become familiar, in time, with the mysteries of "setting" Nouveauté, and to learn that Grandpapa had very nearly smashed the machine in his blind rage the first time he was admitted to the presence of the gentleman with the short pipe.

The latter, as it happened, aroused in Vendeuvre all the curiosity that he himself failed to feel. He worked with the precision of an automaton, required quantities of water for his bodily ablutions, and came home blind drunk as ever was every Saturday night.

Five weeks later, Joseph, who had begun to lose flesh, unpacked before the Sterns a number of samples of his own manufacture which made the hearts of those hard-boiled veterans quiver with surprise. A hasty tour of his customers brought him a respectable number of orders on approval, for both Nouveauté and Amazone. The Simlers set to work without interruption, and did not give a thought to the Sixteenth of May until that inoffensive storm had passed.

The first piece of Amazone and the first piece of Nouveauté came out of the press almost simultaneously, as the hot weather was beginning. The lilac hue of the former, for which Guillaume was personally responsible, was no doubt of a remarkably acid variety. The dull grey, chequered with red and green silk, of the other was not perhaps quite an ideal specimen of " English goods."

They acted nevertheless as fountains in a dry land. All the Alsatian element in the factory came down, one by one, to the warehouse. Each of them took the cloth, tugged at it, and rubbed it between finger and thumb with a knowing air. Mr. Smith was asked to be so kind as to let himself be seen.

His smooth, fair head completed the excited circle that gathered round the Simler family.

While this was happening, Guillaume felt a gentle tug at his sleeve, and the voice of little Uncle Blum whispered in his ear :

" I think it would be as well . . . take Papa out of the room, Wilhelm." Guillaume turned his head in his father's direction. The mask of death had descended upon the old weaver's face. The left eyelid hung down over his cheek like a pouch of flesh. A meaningless smile made his mouth gape open at one side. A colour such as might be obtained by mixing clay and chalk was tinging his neck and temples. Lastly, his right eye remained fastened upon some alarming object, while a corner of the piece of lilac cloth began to slip slowly between his spatulate fingers.

" Take Papa out of the room, I tell you."

Neither Sarah nor anyone else had noticed anything. Guillaume himself could not yet believe his eyes.

He went round to the other side of the table, and touched his father's arm. M. Hippolyte did not appear to feel anything, but the fixed smile on his left cheek became more deeply embedded in it.

" Papa, Papa ! "

" Ah, ab, ab . . ." was the weaver's sole response. Sarah looked across at her husband. She uttered no cry, but thrust her two hands forward, and, propelling her whole weight after them, succeeded in preventing his head from striking against the edge of the massive table.

" Ohoho ! What is the matter now ? " cried Myrtil. No sooner was Hippolyte installed in the big leather armchair than a hissing sound began to issue from his lips amid a tempest of sighs and groans. The children had been sent out of the room, and stood rooted to the ground, in the courtyard, listening to the ebb and flow of a sort of lowing sound, broken by angry gurgles.

Mme. Hippolyte, herself livid, raised her husband's massive head, pressed it to her bosom. One of the foremen whipped off the tie and collar. The trembling dewlap of his throat and the upper part of a formidable brick-red chest swelled and sank with a jerky alternation. The right eye remained open and fastened upon the alarming object.

" We must get him out of here," somebody said. Joseph and Guillaume had lost all their presence of mind. They stooped over the armchair, holding out their ineffectual hands and uttering raucous syllables.

Every arm was lent to the service. And while the shrill voice of Elisa began to wail : " Oh God, oh God ! " the heavy fleshy envelope of Hippolyte Simler passed through the door. The bearers at his head had slowed down for a moment as they reached the landing outside, the dying man's knees rose at a sharp angle, one of his hands fell and began to trail along the ground. Guillaume dashed to the rescue, picked up this hand and clasped it in his own, casting questioning glances to right and left. The head was swaying heavily upon Kapp's arm.

Mr. Smith had taken his hands out of his pockets. He turned to the little uncle : " Oh," he said, " I don't think the old gentleman is quite well," and he knitted his brows with a perplexed air.

A simultaneous impulse brought all the staff to the windows, a cry ran along every floor of the building, and the noise of the factory suddenly died away. But Myrtil had only to raise his peaked eyebrows for the women to disperse like a flight of sparrows, and the sound of the looms to swell to its full volume. Various foremen set off at a run to their several departments.

M. Hippolyte's last agony began in an atmosphere of suffocating gloom. The July heat beat upon the wooden slats of the closed shutters. His body lay half naked upon the

great bed of waxed mahogany, and the stupefied watchers lifted his head to the huge place which it filled. The doors remained open, admitting a creak of cautious boots, and a sickening medley of pharmaceutical odours conveyed to the farthest corners of the establishment the news that human life had reached its term.

Amid a buzz of whispered orders, the necessary implements were fetched. One could almost hear the pressure of the bistoury against the yielding flesh, and, one by one, rich slow drops began to fall into a metal basin, as the first drops of a thunderstorm ring upon the zinc roof of a verandah.

Then, faint as the twitter of a mouse, an " ee-ee-ee " which nobody could identify, rose by the side of the bed. It was Sarah beginning to weep.

" Human medicine can do no more," the doctor murmured to Guillaume and Hermine, casting curious glances round the room. " The body is still robust, but he has used up all his vitality. Do not alarm yourselves unduly. He may last a long time yet. I shall look in again."

Then, while the ritual silence gained a footing everywhere, and only the hum of the factory made the house shake, the last battle began :

" Hahaha ! Light ! Put out the light ! Sarah ! Put out the factory ! But we must carry out our or-ders. Has Jacob written ? Myrtil ! Myrtil ! Are you sure they wrote Bâle on the cases ? If they should find out that they were for Bourbaki's army, for Barmée's arky, at-at-at Lyons. Poor Jacob. Has he come back ? I have seen nothing, German gentlemen ! Eight hundred pieces ? But they were for Bâle, not for Baki, gentlemen, not for Baki. Sarah, tell these gentlemen that Jacob has written and that he has arrived at Lyons! For-the-army-of-Bour-the-army-of-Bour . . . ach ! There : Marmy-pourky ? Marmy. . . . I am so tired."

Then Yiddish gently took the place of French, and a fresh

childlike voice sounded in Hippolyte's ear with the rustle of a morning breeze among a row of poplars.

" My treasure, my Hippolyte," moaned Sarah, laying a timid hand upon the sleeper as he stirred and muttered. But he felt nothing, for his soul had gone far away and was struggling, as it descended towards the roots of things.

" Mamma, O Mamma, why has Myrtil eaten all the cherries ? You ought to have stopped him, you ought . . . Clémentine, the white horse, the big white horse that Papa bought is for Myrtil and me. We shall go to Colmar on the white horse to see Tantele, and Clémentine shall stay behind. I shall hold the *griebe*. The light ! Oh, that light ! Will you please put it out ? Papa will be angry. It is so bad for the eyes. It is dancing. I shall dance too on the night of Hagada. I can say the whole of my *parche*."

The nasal muttering of Hebrew texts took the place of the Yiddish speech. The most far-fetched prayers were uttered one after another, the despairing lamentation of Kippur, the shrill chant of Pesar, which commemorates the escape from Egypt, the rumbling plain-chant of the *Rosh Hashone*, until the moment whan the recaptured *Kaddish* brought the wandering spirit back to Buschendorf, and the angry spirit of the father came to torment the son. Clémentine, the sister who had died in childhood, the complicated family tree, and winter runs amid the snows of Alsace appeared each in turn and passed away, like the light which was incessantly rekindled and which hurt so cruelly that left eye. But none of these images offered any solution. And yet the soul knew that time was pressing.

" Hippolyte, my darling, oh, rest in peace," sobbed Sarah, as the body groaned and tried to turn over. She bent over him, but the dying man's words remained an impenetrable secret.

" He is suffering, seeking, he wants something. Does

either of you know what it is?" Sarah murmured to her sons.

Evening came. The siren did not sound that evening. The workers left the place in silence. They gathered in groups outside the house and dispersed slowly. As soon as they had had their dinners, a certain number returned. Night found them there, and engulfed them with everything else, a warm night quiet and soothing through which a scent of wistaria stole.

"He is worried, he is worried," Sarah said to the doctor. "I can feel that he is worried. Why is it, Doctor? He has surely earned the right to die in peace."

"None of us has earned that right, Madame. You will give him three drops of this prescription in a coffee-spoonful of sugared water, Madame, as soon as he wakes. Death is not a kind or a restful thing, Madame. Have you any ice? Ice for his head? Good, thank you. You will change it every hour, please, Madame. I shall come back about two o'clock in the morning. It is only children that die peacefully, Madame. Should the pulse rise above a hundred and twenty, you must send for me at once. Madame, there is a balance to be struck. It must be done before death, otherwise the soul does not die in peace, and the soul must die, Madame, before the body can die in its turn. What I am saying is not very orthodox, Madame, but that is the way things happen. See that the patient does not uncover himself. A perspiration would do no harm, but you must change his linen at once. Your husband is weighing the pros and cons, at this moment, Madame. If he can balance his account before he dies he will die the happier. That is why we have to prolong life as far as is in our power. The second injection at six o'clock, Madame, that is very important."

M. Hippolyte did not succeed in balancing his accounts until the second sunrise. Then, after two days and nights of search, despairing, no doubt, of finding what he still lacked to

establish the balance, he sighed after a haven for his weariness, and let himself drift upon the current that was bearing him whither he must go.

This was the moment at which the doors were hurriedly opened. Guillaume rose up at the foot of the sofa on which the children had found a sleep disturbed by nightmares.

" Come at once and say good-bye to your grandfather. Quietly. Not a sound."

They sat down in alarm, and were surprised that they no longer heard echoing through the house the raucous, angry trumpet-call which died away and revived like the sound of a badly fitted pump.

His back raised upon a pile of white pillows, M. Hippolyte watched them enter the room. His scalp was bald and polished, his head drooped over his chest, and his lower lip hung down over his shrunken chin, with an unspeakably piteous expression. The sound of the pump came only faintly, in breathless double pulsations, separated by long silences. People were sniffling in the corners of the room. Sarah, her eyes dry and feverish, her hair neatly parted beneath her black cap, stood by the side of the bed and gazed at her husband.

He, with the drooping eye, watched the children approach. The starched shirt was stirred by a sudden movement, and the right hand, on which the flesh hung down on either side of the bones, pointed towards them.

" Hin'—Hin'—Kin'——"

The eye became anxious and a yellow tide flooded its corner. Sarah stooped over him. At length the following words forced a passage through his lips :

" Kinder — Fabrik — Myrtil — Honest — Good children — Work—Riches . . . no, no need—Take great care—Money —no—no need—no, great care !—Ach ! Sarah,—my—my love ! "

There followed a sort of convulsion. " Go ! " was shouted

in the ears of the children and they found themselves on the landing outside

The soul of Hippolyte Simler, having doubtless found what it was seeking, abruptly ceased its calculations, and set his body free to enter as it might choose into the vast flux of non-existence.

VI

" I DECLARE, THEY HAVEN'T GIVEN THE OLD MACCABEE TIME to grow cold ! "

This is what everyone was saying, in Vendeuvre, on the day after M. Hippolyte's funeral. It had been said that the Simlers were fated always to surprise their fellow-citizens. On this day, they surprised their mother herself. When the wail of the siren rent the silence, the old woman covered her face with her hands to shut out the sacrilege. When Joseph and her beloved Guillaume came and tapped at her door for the *Kaddish*, they found a frozen face with tightly pressed lips :

" Oh ! The shame of it ! Not to have prayed as much as twelve hours over their dead father ! "

But when, after gathering first in the warehouse, with burning brows and choking throats, the Simlers, uncle and nephews, started to go across to the factory, it was the nephews' turn to be surprised. Myrtil set off at a sharp pace to the weaving-room, and, making a sign to Zeller, took over M. Hippolyte's duties for that morning.

At the midday break, they found him seated in the dead man's own chair, inside the little glazed cage. He wrinkled the triple penthouse of his profile, thrust out his hand, seized a bundle of letters which were on the table, and, casting a bitter glance at them, began :

" What does this mean ? Verneuil writes that two pieces in the last order were badly joined. Who is in charge of the joining, here ? "

But neither of the two younger Simlers was unaware that time was pressing. A question of life or death. The machine that they had set in motion had no longer any common measure with the episodes of family life. Either the orders that Joseph brought back from Paris would be executed by the promised date, or the Simlers would have nothing else to do but to hand back the keys to M. Gabard, house and estate agent.

In reality they were no less horror-stricken than Mme. Hippolyte. That their father should be dead, and the earth continue to turn, was in no way remarkable. That the factory should go on as usual, this filled them with anguish.

If they had taken this opportunity and had allowed themselves a whole day in which to meditate upon this phenomenon, the Simlers would doubtless have emerged from it armed against more than one amazement, in the future. It is indeed probable that they would have made more than one discovery. They did not give themselves that day. They did not grant it to themselves that week nor in the weeks that followed, that year nor in the years that followed. They were not in the habit of speaking of holidays, in their family.

At the most Guillaume would occasionally turn his head with an effort, in the course of the afternoon, when, alone in his den in the spinning-room, he felt the ceilings, walls and floors throb round about him, with the ceaseless clatter of the machines.

"If I were to kill myself, here, would that *thing* stop?"

He sank back in his armchair, bowed his head, let his arms trail on the ground, shammed dead, keeping watch athwart the flooding tide of his heart. But the imperturbable tumult—a copper ball rolling along a road of sheet-iron—revealed no pity. Guillaume then left his office, crimson with shame and terror, raced through the rooms,

leaving the foremen breathless in his wake, immersing his substance in a life which he discovered to be more durable than his own. And when, that evening, his eye fell upon Justin, he could not refrain from saying :

" Hurry up, Justin. Your place is waiting for you. We need you."

It needs no more than this to make a youngster of fifteen form a high opinion of his own importance in the world. In '79, the portentous figure reached before the crisis had reappeared in the balance-sheet. Justin derived from this the best arguments in the world for making his own presence desired, and for continuing to conduct his precious person through the matriculation exams, with brilliant success.

On the tenth of July, 1880, the balance-sheet revealed an upward leap of twelve hundred and fifty thousand francs. The turnover exceeded the fifth million, and went a quarter of the way into the sixth.

On the 12th, Guillaume returned home unexpectedly at eight o'clock in the morning, rattling a stiff sheet of paper in both hands. Justin, in white linen trousers, a light alpaca jacket, an irreproachable straw hat on his somewhat boldly featured head, was preparing to spend a day on the river with a few bosom friends—a pale replica of those famous days on the Marne. Laure was finishing her breakfast with the airs of a kitten by a plate of milk that had not yet cooled, and was eyeing her brother with a passably caustic glance. Hermine came running into the room in her dressing-gown and slippers, a strip of flannel dangling from her arm.

" Listen," cried Guillaume breathlessly. " This is a letter I found in the post. It went to the factory by mistake."

And he read it out with emphasis, not omitting a line of the text whether printed or in manuscript:

LYCÉE DE VENDEUVRE

CABINET
DE M. LE PROVISEUR.

Vendeuvre, 11 July, 1880.

SIR,

I have the honour to offer you my warmest congratulations on the occasion of the brilliant success with which your son, my pupil Simler (Justin) has brought his scholastic years to a close. He has passed his third matriculation with the maximum of marks ever hitherto obtained in our Academy. The Rector has kindly allowed me to see the highly eulogistic note which the Dean of the Faculty of Science has devoted to our former pupil in the report which he presented to the Minister at the end of the session.

I should be most happy, Sir, to send you myself a copy of a document which does honour to the Establishment of which I have charge, and will ever remain among our archives.

M. Justin Simler has, however, made us accustomed to regard him as one of the best justifications which we have had, up to the present, for believing in the excellence of the methods which form the tradition of the University of France. The threefold consecration that has crowned the last three years of his presence among us, and the variety of aptitudes to which his successes bear witness, in the faculty of Arts as in that of Science, will make us regret for ever the departure of a person whose name our pupils will learn to remember, when they see it engraved in letters of gold, at the beginning of next term, on the great Board of Honour in our venerable hall.

But the object of my addressing you is not merely, Sir, to convey to you my personal congratulations ; we all of us consider that your son belongs to the Studies for which he has shown so remarkable an aptitude. Whatever the special branch that may tempt him, we feel that we may

predict for him a brilliant career. The Superior Normal School awaits him. I flatter myself that I shall have no difficulty in obtaining your assent to a decision of such high importance. Kindly regard this hope as chief among the reasons that make me desire to obtain from you the opportunity for discussion which I request.

I have the honour to be, &c.

A Jew would sell the shirt off his back in order to learn to read, and goes without bread so that he may have his children taught. If we consider that the sole distinction before which these people have ever bowed has been erudition, that they have no priests, but only doctors, that three-quarters of their books deal with historical and philological disputes, in short that, accustomed by necessity to purchasing everything, they know that learning is the one thing that cannot be bought with money, we can imagine the thunderbolt that this letter produced.

That same evening, all Vendeuvre, already informed, ten years back, of the ever-increasing merits of Monsieur Simler (Justin), had read, re-read and commented on the document. At eleven o'clock that morning Joseph had arrived, his face aglow with pride, his arms flung open, and a gleam of noble triumph had shot from the deeply shadowed eyes of Uncle Myrtil.

As for Laure, she was in an ecstasy of excitement, having discovered in the eyes of the redheaded Hermance, the very same expression with which Aunt Elisa used to gaze at Uncle Jos—not so very long ago.

Justin remained impassive, as "British" as could be desired. But his innocent heart was bursting with joy.

The letter told him nothing, unless it was that the solemn imbecility of the academic style knows no bounds. And the head's greasy self-importance, in spite of his continual failure to obtain a Chair, brought everything back into focus.

And yet the head was playing only a more or less neutral part as intermediary. Behind him there were the School Inspector, likewise a person of no importance, the Rector, who carried more weight, the two Deans (Arts and Science), the Inspector General, who had carefully put the candidate through his paces at each of his two latest inspections, the Director of Secondary Education, the Supreme Council, the Minister's Secretaries, finally Jules Ferry himself, that is to say, the great administrative machine of France from bottom to top. Each of these, not to mention the ushers, prefects, secretaries, clerks, deputy-chiefs and chiefs of departmental branches, had learned the name of Simler (Justin) and had recorded it somewhere, so as to find it again and remember it.

Justin was not the sort of boy to misinterpret the smile that had beamed upon the faces of his examiners, affable and circumspect men, when the " tangent " had addressed him by his name, with a wink of old acquaintance, at each of his last two orals ; nor yet the tone of social and at the same time learned conversation in which these interrogations had been made. The Prefect knew him by sight after having crowned him at least ten times with his own hands, on prize-giving days, and the President of the Court of Appeal acknowledged the doffing of Justin's hat with a cordial wrinkling of his shrivelled face, for a similar reason.

Nor did Justin lack ears. He had heard it said that the Republic wanted men. He could not help feeling sure that she had cast her eye upon himself.

The Normal School awaited him. But the Normal is an objective only for simpletons. Justin felt no desire to teach Latin verses and the analytical admiration of *Cinna* to thirty successive classes of young Frenchmen. As for preaching, from a professorial chair, a rationalist idealism, finally reconciling Janet, Taine and Cournot (he went as far as that), this remained to be seen. Moreover, the Faculties

lead to more than one haven. Guizot, Sainte-Beuve, yes, or even that worthy Monsieur Duruy, are proofs of this.

It must be explained that these reflections were accompanied by the emphatic one-two of the rowing coach, while Justin endeavoured to steer as straight as possible, the question being that of training to break the " thousand " record for France established by the Lower Seine.

However, a practical mind, which is not embarrassed by any ideology, manages to keep cool in any circumstances. His friends had shown their perception of this quality when they made him their coxswain. To it he decided to leave the question of his future.

" Granted that there is a struggle required everywhere (in view of the equality of the opposed forces), the question comes down to this : in what sphere will the struggle be most effective ? I mean by that : most rapidly and most effectively useful. Useful to what ? To two things. First of all : to myself, Justin Simler, three times matriculated, determined not to waste my time here on earth (let us leave out of account everything but the spiritual meaning of the words that we may use). Secondly, to France, which is my country, to the Republican State, which has made me a free citizen, and to Society, which protects me in my person and my goods. I owe to them renown, strength, riches, in return for what they have given, are giving, and have yet to give me. And *since* it is in this fashion that I shall waste my time least upon earth, we thus reduce to a single object the original duality of purpose, which always simplifies things, which is the sign of a properly framed question, and conforms with the best logic. I declare, I know how to reason."

Having reached this point, Justin felt a self-satisfaction infinitely keener than that which he had derived from the head's letter.

" This established, it is as clear as daylight that, if little

Chavasse goes on rowing like a housewife skimming her pot, we shall pass the buoy by at least three breadths. Let that be a lesson to me, and deter me from a form o activity in which success must be a function of other people's skill. This dependence is exactly what I find in the teaching career. A professor's success does not depend entirely upon his talent nor upon his work. There are plenty of lean years for every fat one."

Here, M. Simler junior embraced in a glance those of his contemporaries who formed the eight, and reminded himself, to his own satisfaction, of different incidents in his passage through the lycée of Vendeuvre.

" Well then, let us count up : one year of idleness (I reckon *one* year of preparation) ; Normal, three years ; volunteer service, one ; lycée teaching, preparation and defence of thesis, three . . . four . . . five . . . five years. Five and one, six ; and three, nine ; and one makes ten. Eighteen and ten make twenty-eight. Two years at least to establish the value " (he dared not say " the fame ") " of my course, that makes me thirty. From then onwards, three thousand francs a year as a master, later on five thousand, I suppose, as full-blown Professor. I declare, I know how to count."

The eight having just failed to capsize as they rounded the buoy, the coxswain's logical process was slightly interrupted. But the vigorous one-two of the coach restored its rhythm.

" Well now, Joseph " (he had ceased to say " Uncle ") " was in love with Mademoiselle Le Pleynier, and he married Elisa with whom he was not in love. But they have made five million, two hundred and fifty thousand francs. In four years, the profits are doubled, and *they* might make more. Old Le Pleynier was ruined, the Sterns have now more than a million. The whole of Vendeuvre came to Grandpapa's funeral, and they treated him like a dog in 1871. If I go

into the factory in October (I am going to begin by insisting upon my holidays), *they* will make me spend two months in the spinning-room, three months weaving, one month dyeing and so forth, which I know as well as they do ; then six months in the warehouse with Joseph, and buying material with Uncle Myrtil, which is a less deadly prospect. On the first of October 1881, I shall take over the treating and dyeing, with a fixed salary of five thousand francs a year and a percentage on profits. I know. In five years, they may let me have *so many* shares, and I join the Board. Whatever happens, in ten years I shall be earning twenty or twenty-five thousand francs a year, I shall be in command of a capital of from sixty to sixty-five thousand francs. I shall have no expenses. I shall be somebody."

It was the strict truth. Nevertheless, we feel bound to point out that this " having no expenses " upon which Justin prided himself implied already a set of habits which would have meant oriental luxury to thirty millions of his fellow-countrymen. A mere matter of social grades. But it is surprising that this aspect of the question should have escaped so incisive an intelligence.

Justin was in the habit of writing. If his manuscripts were brief, they were expressive. His method consisted in setting forth in parallel columns the advantages and drawbacks of any decision. He was distinctly proud of this method, in which the Simler strain was more apparent than he knew.

On reaching home, he went upstairs and locked himself in his room. He possessed character, but he had no sense of order. The young and irreverent Louis Simler came upon this paper afterwards. And, being more interested because of his inability to understand it than for any other reason (a deplorable method from the practical point of view), he folded it up and put it aside, in the hope that he might one day find an opportunity of ragging his cousin.

This is the curious document, in itself scarcely comprehensible :

REASONS FOR ACCEPTING THE HEAD'S OFFER	REASONS AGAINST ACCEPTING THE HEAD'S OFFER
(*a*) *Negative reasons.*	(*a*) *Negative reasons.*
Risks of a crisis.	Passe-Lourdin.
(Risk of strikes ? ?)	Joseph and Mlle. Le Pleynier.
(Uncle Blum ?)	Old Le Pleynier, factory in the Venelle Saint-Hilaire.
An uneasy, disturbed existence, no intellectual life (remains to be seen!)	Sedentary life, pedantry, penury, the Limousin schoolboy, the Sterns.
(*b*) *Positive reasons.*	(*b*) *Positive reasons.*
Extremely interesting work.	An active life.
Certain influence, even if belated and indirect.	Almost certain influence, rapid and direct.
Inculcating theoretical study from a practical point of view.	Social position. Action upon the practical evolution of municipal, departmental, parliamentary politics.
	Example of England, the Netherlands.
	Inculcating material occupations from an idealist point of view.
	Helping towards the formation of a strong, cultivated middle class.

" Ough," he said as he rose from the table, " I think the Normal gets it in the neck."

It was the devil of a job, that evening, to make head or tail of Guillaume's story. He had run, hot and breathless, and flung himself into the Headmaster's arms, and it appeared, first and foremost, that the people there had overwhelmed him with congratulations.

Justin, in his irritation, cut short this " family *galantine*," as he was rude enough to name this agglomeration of noble sentiments. It then appeared that the Headmaster had urgently repeated the objurgations contained in his letter.

Guillaume mixed up, in his statement, in the most touching fashion, the Normal School with the Collége de France, mathematical analysis with comparative grammar. What remained certain was that Justin was summoned to an exalted destiny, and that France (official France, to be accurate—but was there any question of any other ?) awaited him.

If anyone but his father had reported these formal declarations, Justin would no doubt have taken his time. But the shrill tone and vague nature of his father's remarks inspired him with a morbid desire to bring into play a cold, dry, decided tone, such as may be heard in England. This tone had brought a discreet smile to the lips of more than one " old Normal " in the lycée, and had impressed itself on the memories of ushers, porter and public opinion generally, ever since his third year, in which Justin had adopted it. And besides, what boy can ever resist the pleasure of astonishing a family table ? Now there were seven of them present, that evening, not including himself.

" I know all that quite as well as they do," Justin accordingly broke in with immense phlegm. " I have not waited for them to be so kind as to invite me there to make the offer. I can secure an—ahem !—honourable career in the University. On the other hand, humph !, Louis is only five. How much longer will you three be able to carry on, down there ? " (He pointed his thumb backwards over his shoulder.) " Everything depends upon what offer you can make me."

" Boo-oo ! He's starting well, my brother is ! The cheek ! "

And Laure turned upon him a pair of eyes rounded by a serene indignation. Guillaume floundered in the quagmire of paternal delight. Hermine felt her eyes grow moist with sheer pride. Elisa's husband rose and came towards his nephew with open arms :

" You are right, Justin. You are a brave boy, and you are choosing the better way. Stay with us, we will give you the position to which you are entitled."

" Good, good," Myrtil expressed his approbation, jerkily relaxing the tendons of his throat. As for Sarah, a faint misgiving had flitted through her mind. But Justin was her grandson, and he was going to remain in the factory. We must not expect too much of human nature.

VII

du Plantis, 24 December, 1882.

DEAR AND GREAT FRIEND,

An hour ago, the ten years came to an end during which I vowed that I would never mention a certain subject. I have kept my word. And now that I come to break this long silence, I ask myself whether what I have now to relate will carry me to the foot of this page. Is it even worth the trouble of mentioning it again ? If I wish to be clever, I might say that this story is like a manuscript which its author has kept for too long in a drawer of his desk ; when he takes it out again, it is out-of-date and worthless. I have not died of a broken heart. But Hélène Le Pleynier's heart does not break. So then you must regard this letter as written by one old woman to another. Old wives' tales are everywhere entitled to a respectful hearing.

Ten years and one hour ago, I knew that that man was not for me. At that moment, the personal interest which I used to take in life came to an end. Heaven be praised, and you—and myself as well, i' faith !—I began to develop another

interest, which has flourished and grown. Will it be a challenge to fate if I say that the general meaning of existence had never been revealed to me until that moment? Question myself as I may, today, I cannot succeed in persuading myself that this substitution of the whole for the part has been anything more than a wretched subterfuge. Subterfuge? Perhaps. In that case, Dame Nature is a marvellous actress, for I have been as completely taken in as the youngest chit in the back row of the gallery. Wretched? Certainly not; so long as there is a drop of life remaining anywhere, wretchedness has no right of entry there.

Does this mean that I felt no regret? I have remained silent for ten years. That was enough to assure me that I should not be straining the truth were I to admit, now, that my unhappiness was immense. And it is still just as keen as on the first day. I have told you that this letter is written by one widow to another. What woman can contemplate, without starting back in horror, the day that made her an old woman?

But one need not be wretched even with a lasting regret. In any case, it was worth trying. I feel nothing but disgust for the inconsolable. Life would become too easy if we could convert our unhappiness into a small change of lamentations, and really too abject if each trial could not find its compensation, and more.

However, I am teaching my grandmother how to suck eggs. You were already a past-mistress of all this lore before I had mastered my alphabet. It is more to the point that I should tell you that my stupid inflammation of the kidneys had nothing to do with our return home. It has very properly been left submerged in the waters of Vittel. After seven years, it was high time. But our last eighteen months of hotel life began all of a sudden to weigh upon my father and myself, and we returned here, the day before yesterday, post haste.

Who would ever have said that I should have to

travel for five years on end with that man without flinging myself fifty times over into the sea, out of sheer exasperation ? Ever since the only day in my life on which it entered his head to insult me, by asserting, inspired by my gallant brother, that my behaviour had authorised a *Simlèr* to show insufficient respect for me, and on which I put him so firmly in his place, the dear man has felt such remorse for his own behaviour and has been in such awe of myself that he has become, upon my word, the sweetest of fathers. You saw him in this state, a year ago.

You have probably realised by now that it was not a mere accident that the longing for Le Plantis came to us just before Christmastide. I was obliged to return here so that the fruit of these ten years might be complete.

But you will never imagine the friendly greeting that my home has given me. This morning, at break of day, my murmuring sister the Auxance, my big brothers the trees, my gnarled grandfather the plain, and the beautiful level meadows, glistening with hoarfrost, received me with the most joyous welcome. Apart from yourself, I felt that I had all the company that I could wish among whom to celebrate this anniversary.

And as chance does what it chooses without waiting to be asked, whom should I see this very day but him, *him* whom I had never seen in all those years ?

The place does not matter. I was quite close, quite at my ease, completely invisible.

It was so entirely unexpected, but such a marvellous coincidence, that I was left speechless, and incapable, for a minute or more, of seizing the opportunity. Then I found myself on the point of going to him, taking him by the hand, and saying to him : " Sit down, let us talk, and tell me what sort of man you have become in these ten years."

Who knows ? His face still retains so much of the old simplicity that he might have approved. But he

was with his family, and his escort attracted my attention as well.

He does not look like an unhappy man. He seems light-hearted and well, with a general air of weariness that spreads over everything. I question myself: my pride is perhaps over-anxious to discover in him the weariness of a man who has never known happiness, is not satisfied with not having known it, and seeks to get rid of the thought. Alas, no; I have not been dreaming; there it is, broadly displayed. God knows along what paths he must have taken it! His youthfulness, which will never desert him, has a little rift through which many precious things must have escaped. His wife suspects this. The poor creature would indeed be miserable if she had not a thick hide within which everything is bound to be melted by the charity of an occasional caress and the consolation of good feeding. She is a thoroughly gelatinous person, of the sort that makes jealous wives, plaintive, whining and persecuted. But peace be with her. She has borne him children. I have seen them. The eldest is a red-haired creature with rectangular eyes who perpetuates, for good or evil, her mother's image. The youngest must be about five years old; I fancy that he contents himself with eating and drinking, with a few dreams of glory which will only too easily find their satisfaction in position and money.

But what am I to say to you, Dear Friend, of the creature that comes between the redhead and the glutton, except that it ought to have been ours, *his* and mine? You will have guessed that it was of this that I was thinking, just now, when I spoke of compensation!

The nervous, ardent, quivering slenderness of the needle of a pair of scales; a thing, without sex or age by dint of resembling them all; the overlong arms and the little shrunken stomach of one who is doomed to the curse of the flesh; but a full chest, a complexion, a movement that guarantee a hundred years of life, and, in the eyes, Experience, all Ex-

perience, human and other, in the inhuman state still, raw, like a metal before it is cast, hard, distrustful and sad, streaked with childish joys and with that grave puerility at which it will see, for fifty years of its life, the pedants shake their heads.

That child is ours. Whether he come to me one day or I never see him again, it is sufficient that he exist, and that I have assured myself, once and for all time, of his existence. He was the young violinist whose acid and decided bowing rooted us to the ground, you and myself, on the only occasion on which we went past their house.

Ah ! What does it matter to him that the Simlers have become rich, and are destined to become steadily richer ? That after attracting to themselves all the life that was perishing in this miserable Vendeuvre, they can make nothing of it but a more highly tainted death ? He will escape from them, from it, and from everything here. He was destined to *us*, and he will compensate for all the others. It will be easier for me to die, now that this child has come, *as he was obliged to come*. And so I was not mistaken about that man ! Oh you, the prudent friend who would not forgive him, will you forgive him now, now that having begotten this creature he has played his part in life, and that I, having written this letter, have come to the end of mine ?

At that moment, to return to it, I saw myself on the point of going and taking the man by the hand, and saying to him, this time : " My brother, the work has been well begun, let us withdraw now, for fear of spoiling it ; we have nothing left to do."

Never was the fruit of any womb more my own than that child. *Praise God, Pimpleton !* My joy is so winged that I shall be saying something idiotic in a moment. Still, life is a marvellous thing, don't you agree ?

A word about the other. You remember Justin ? He is now a Gentleman who sucks the knob of his cane with a thoroughly fashionable air. There was

good stuff in that young Simler. But it should have been passed through the mill, teased and trimmed. The tissue is not strong. Life has spared him the dry bread, the hard blows which his nature needed. It has turned him into a fop, the intelligent kind of fop, who knows himself, has money, a smooth tongue, a certain aptitude for business, but who, plunged in a too feeble environment, triumphs too soon, does not know where to fix his ambition and readily becomes unhappy.

His sister astonished me. Can it be the violinist who has attracted her already to himself? He would be quite capable of it. We shall see many other things, if we only live. She had remained in my memory as a typical lady's maid, quite prepared to suppress the lady in herself, with something more than insignificance to help her to succeed. I was mistaken. She has become quite pretty, and has acquired a certain air which, so far as I can judge, is not without a certain cousinship to *the Other* and promises a surprise to those who least expect it.

The father of these two is still the same yellow Seer who used to make me think of the Minor Prophets of their Scripture. But life has managed to pass over him with the seven plates of the cylinder. It has left of him only a flat shadow. The wife is that grim Harpy, the sight of whom makes me long to trample upon her in order to hear the sound that her slavish, floor-scrubbing soul would make beneath my heel.

Has my day been wasted? You will not think so. I have no longer any need of high roads. Le Plantis seemed to me to show a divine antiquity, after Rome, Sicily and Greece. My father plunges in among his tenants like a duck into its native pond. I have been surrounded, for the last two days, by a tempest of shouts, disputes, and uncorked bottles which rejuvenates me from top to toe. Come, Dear and Great Friend, we expect you. The spirit is grateful and pacified for ever.

HÉLÈNE LE PLEYNIER.

P. S. The Lorilleux, who had put everything into the *Union Générale*, have lost every penny they possessed. The old man was kept under observation for three days for fear of his committing suicide. Until it is possible to hand his wife five-franc pieces wrapped in tissue paper, people are sending her soup, and oranges for the children. For that matter, one hears of nothing here but bankruptcy and ruin. These people are so sluggish that the storm has burst over them before they were even aware that the clouds were gathering. Of course they accuse the Simlers, whose only crime is that of having foreseen the crash, but who, finding things within their grasp, are seizing them. Even then they are showing discretion, and biding their time.

VIII

CAFÉ DU CHEMIN DE FER

MARTIN-NOISETTE

Vins et Spiritueux
Vins de pays

Vendeuvre, 1 May, 1886.

Spécialité de bière au tonneau

REPAS A LA CARTE

ON GARDE LES VALISES

To Citizen Jules Guesde, Paris.

Citizen Guesde !

Taking as an excuse for troubling you the fact that I was one of the audience of the interesting lecture which you delivered three years ago in the Market of this town of Vendeuvre, not to mention my having been among the earliest readers and propagandists of your writings, I venture to send you some information as to the most recent

developments of the social struggle and the capitalist concentration in this industrial region !

The first point to which I feel that I may profitably draw your attention is the rapidity with which events in our town are endorsing the principles of scientific communism as revealed to us by the genius of Karl Marx ! You may yourself have observed their effects during your two visits to the place. But the crisis which affected the woollen and cloth-weaving industry in the year 1877 had not then produced its full effect ! This is the state of things to-day : in 1870, the industrial establishments of the canton of Vendeuvre numbered 26, employing 7,300 men and women, without counting a fairly large number of outside workers, women spinning in the fields and cottage weavers ; the annual turnover of these 26 establishments amounted to 31 millions.

At the present moment the canton of Vendeuvre (I have these figures from a friend of our comrade secretary of the workers' union, Comrade Vursant, who is employed in the secretarial department of the *bourgeoise* Chamber of Commerce) contains no more than 14 industrial establishments employing 5,430 men and women and not a single outside worker ! Annual turnover : about 19 millions ! !

As you see, Vendeuvre has declined a long way from the prosperous years before '70 ! But the most remarkable thing is that of these 14 establishments six are manufacturing produce other than cloth. We possess, in fact, a shirt factory, two tanneries, a brewery, a shop for mechanical constructions and a factory devoted to the preparation of gooseskins. There remain therefore only eight weaving mills in a town which was at one time the Queen of French textiles ! Very well, and this, citizen Guesde ! is the point that I have been trying to make, of these eight cloth factories, one alone, the establishments known by the name of *Simler et Cie* employ eighteen hundred men and women and have a turnover that cannot be far short of eight figures ! ! !

Nor can you imagine without seeing it the transformation that this rapid concentration has wrought in our town ! Most of the old factories are silent and falling into ruin ! There are whole districts which give the impression that fire, flood or pestilence has passed over them and I can assure you that those long dumb walls do not brighten up our town. On the other hand the lower districts (I don't know whether you remember the geography of a town in which to our regret you have spent a few hours only !) are bursting with activity and noise ! For it is there that the establishments have sprung up of *Simler et Cie* !

These facts are hardly known outside this neighbourhood. That is why it occurred to me that it might be of interest to bring them to the notice of our comrades of the P. O. F.,[1] through yourself, as well as to your own notice, as they will be of immense use to you in your propaganda !

You will ask me next the cause of this concentration. As to this I must be less precise but I shall give you a summary of the rumours that one hears with regard to this subject ! I remember very well that when the Simlers arrived at Vendeuvre, coming from a small village in Alsace immediately after the war and bringing with them a few workmen from their village, they were still very humble folk ! and the factory in which they installed themselves at first and which is still to be seen (they have left part of their spinning-mill in it) is scarcely brilliant ! ! but they were very hard workers, and besides, like all the Jews, they were largely supported by the Big Banks of Paris ! the Rothschild and others, for those people always help one another ! The worker was treated no worse by them than elsewhere. But as the owners were always on the spot, the output required of each man was naturally greater, which is a drawback in one sense but is compensated in

[1] How many Frenchmen are still aware that these initials denote the extinct Parti Ouvrier Français (French Workers' Party), founded by Guesde, in 1880?

another because the foremen and other non-coms and jailers cannot abuse their power so freely as when they are free to do what they like without the master's eye on them ! Well then, with the help of Rothschild money, they were already in a pretty strong position when the great Crisis of 1877 came, smashing half of the oldest factories in the place. They managed to weather the storm and having introduced in time self-coloured cloth and the fancy goods known as *nouveauté* into their factory, they survived and have continued to advance ever since all the more rapidly since all competition had so to speak disappeared from the scene ! The factories that still remain cannot compete with them and the bankruptcy of the *Union Générale* helped considerably to weaken them, which is curious when we see how these capitalists fight against one another, devour and rob one another under the régime which they have baptised that of peace and public order ! !

Having given you this summary of the situation, I must now inform you of the consequences that have arisen from it, so far as they affect the development of Socialism among us. It is unfortunately less rapid than might have been expected, in view of the conditions ! And that is due to several causes, the first and certainly the most important of which is that the great crisis, the minor crises which have followed it pell-mell, and the stagnation to which they have led have turned a considerable number of unemployed upon the streets ! The population of our town has declined by two thousand inhabitants in five years, many of the former workers have opened taverns ; there is a keen competition among them which is all the more deplorable since it puts them under the thumb of the police and they become very timid when it is a question of lending their premises for our corporative or instructional meetings ! Moreover the abundance of unemployed serves the interests of the employers who bully and intimidate the workers, never hesitating to sacrifice the *leaders*, in other

words, our most courageous militants ! In this we are testing once again, to our own hurt, the truth of that great principle of Marx according to which the stronger and more prosperous a capitalist class becomes the greater the opportunity that Socialism has of developing in opposition !

In the second place, there are with the Simlers a large number of Alsatians, all Jews and Protestants who came here with their " masters " in 1871, who follow them with a doglike devotion and show themselves absolutely refractory to our propaganda ! We shall have to wait until this fatal element has died out before we can hope to obtain any effective result and to develop a true class-consciousness.

Finally, the Simlers carry on that sort of private charity which all socialists have so rightly denounced as being the direct opposite of equalitarian justice and as retarding the collective appropriation of invested wealth ! They have what are called open pockets. (I speak of the elder members of the family, for the younger ones seem determined to adopt the " high and mighty " style, at which we rejoice !) And you know whether anything else has such an effect on the workman as these humiliating charities which enslave him and make him flexible and crawling ! We attempt, generally in vain ! to open the eyes of these poor sheep as to the difference there is between a twenty-franc piece bestowed here or there or a visit from the ladies bringing in their carriage a loaf of bread or a meat-ticket to a woman in childbed, and the fantastic profits realised annually by these Capitalists by the aid of Human Toil paid 30 centimes an hour for working 11, 12 and 13 hours a day !

Nevertheless the situation has become so intolerable that notwithstanding all these reasons for despair, there occurred last year among our working-class an impulse to revolt ! You have heard of the three weeks' strike that we underwent from the 8th of November to the 2nd of December last. I

had not time to tell you of it at the moment, I do so now. The spinners in the Simler factory asked for 40 centimes an hour for men, 35 for women, 30 for children, the fine-drawers 30 centimes and the weavers 35 and 45 respectively, with an eight hour day for children under sixteen and ten hours for all the rest. The masters accepted the claim of the fine-drawers who had started the movement and those put forward on behalf of the children. They turned down all the others and the strike was declared ! But what can you expect with an unconscious proletariat, unorganised, numbering barely 200 members enrolled in and subscribing to the Union ? We tried to provide for those whose need was greatest ! We managed as best we could to keep up our communal soup-kitchens, to distribute a few garments and 50 centimes daily to each striker. But in four days our safe was empty ! If our comrades in Paris, Vienne, Elbeuf and Troyes had not hearkened to the call of solidarity, the hardship would have been appalling, the weather having suddenly turned cold ! Finally we were obliged to surrender and resume the harness of slavery. Our enemies took the opportunity to make a fearful decimation of our ranks ! they refused to re-engage twenty-one of our comrades most of whom were obliged to quit the district, leaving their furniture in pawn and weakening still further our little battalion of militants.

You see, dear citizen Guesde ! that the situation is far from favourable and that the working-class of our region must expect long years of oppression and starvation before they see the day dawn upon which will triumph the right of every man to a living wage, the reorganising power of Labour and the proletarian Republic !

Yet, if you wish my opinion, there is, I consider, no justification for complete despair. Many considerations ought to give us courage and I often set them before our comrades when I see them inclined to give way to discouragement.

The first is that the strike last year, utterly disastrous as it proved, brought to light a quite remarkable energy and devotion ! It established a bond between many of us who were previously ill acquainted and were jealous of one another. Broussists, Proudhonians, Blanquists and Libertarians, whom the imminence of danger coalesced into activity. It is only by working at the forge that one becomes a blacksmith. So far from the failure of a strike made with so little preparation having demoralised the proletariat we took advantage of every opportunity that it offered us to spread among them the socialist doctrine, the breath of revolution, and the most vehement appeals with a view to a powerful class organisation. In short the great formula of the Workers' International : " The Emancipation of the Workers will be the task of the workers themselves " has not lacked its echo in the consciousness of the proletariat of Vendeuvre and our little battalion comes out of the test inured to battle rather than discouraged !

I add that on the masters' side also we shall soon see a change ! The establishments of *Simler et Cie* have owed their great success to their activity and the pains they have taken to keep their plant constantly abreast of the progress of science. Now it is quite evident that this activity has begun to decline, the fortune they have made and the ease of their success is putting them to sleep in their turn. Certain comrades who have come here from Roubaix and elsewhere have already informed us that the methods employed by our industrials are beginning to date ! A more up-to-date firm has only to establish itself here and the Simlers will meet with the fate to which they have doomed their rivals ! If you will allow a humble apiarist to find in his favourite occupation a metaphor in which to express his thought : one would say that fortune brings with it the same dangers as those bees which unconsciously seal up in the same cell their own egg and the egg of a parasite which is their most

dangerous enemy ! The desire to enjoy the wealth they have so speedily acquired has crept in among these proud bourgeois ! We have seen them in the last fifteen years change their abode three times, abandon the little house that sheltered them all when first they came, to spread by degrees into the most costly mansions in the town ! These people who used to wear out their shoe-leather like the common herd, now drive about the place in carriages ! ! If the older members of the family make little use of these, the younger ones have lost all inclination to mingle with ordinary mortals. Their carriage-wheels spatter us with mud as they pass ; M. Justin Simler, who entered the factory barely five years ago, behaves there with an insolence the like of which was never before seen. It is to him more than anyone that our comrades attribute the rejection of their demands. This young bourgeois leaves his work at four or five o'clock in the afternoon when those who are earning him his leisure toil over their looms until nightfall ! He is associated with the least reputable of our young men who lead a scandalous life, seduce our young working-girls and bring shame and dishonour into proletarian families ! ! But our comrades allow none of these activities to pass unremarked and even if we do not see the day dawn on which accounts shall be fairly settled, the evolution of Social Realities will not be long in descending upon the heads of our oppressors ! Let us hope that, when the moment comes, the Working-Class may have become strong enough not to allow to fall into any hands but their own the instruments of public wealth !

Accept, dear citizen Guesde ! my socialist and brotherly greeting,

FOURNIER AUGUSTE,
formerly a mechanic in the firm of Simler et Cie
dismissed for activities in the strike !
specialist in bee-keeping,
secretary of the section of the P. O. F.

(EPILOGUE : 1889)

EPILOGUE

I

CERTAINLY, HAD YOU PLACED ONE ABOVE ANOTHER, BY AN ingenious process, all the images of Benjamin stored up in the memories of the different Simlers, you would not have produced the alert, corpulent Yankee who plumped, as he sprang from the train, into Guillaume's arms.

A month earlier, Afroum had sent a cutting from the *Temps*, which he had carefully marked with a blue pencil. It appeared from this that among the passengers of note who had landed from the *Champagne*, at the Bassin de l'Eure, the most important was Mr. Ben Stern, an American multi-millionaire. "The considerable fortune of Mr. Ben Stern, rapidly acquired in railways, cotton, and machinery, is not the only original feature of this typically American personage. As cannot be said of a certain number of his fellow-countrymen, the source of his fortune appears to be free from any taint, and the magnificent generosity of its possessor does honour to that class of business men for whom we are indebted to the feverish activity of the New World. Mr. Ben Stern arrived in poverty at New York, in 1872. He is, therefore, a self-made man in the full sense of the term. Let us add that this remarkable representative of American energy is of French origin. A native of our lost provinces, Mr. Ben Stern is understood to have served in the ranks of our army during the Terrible Year and to have received his baptism of fire on the battlefield of Gravelotte. Mr. Ben Stern's father is none other than one of the most highly esteemed merchants of the Bonne-Nouvelle quarter. Mr. Ben Stern has been attracted to our shores, like so many of his compatriots, by a desire to visit our great World Exposition."

" Hallo, Will ! Don't you remember me ? "

The blend of the nasal intonations of Alsace and America produced a strange result.

" The wife ? Children ? Business ? All right ! Presto ! I've an appetite and I want to see all the dear old faces. Old Will ! Not changed an atom ! "

Guillaume, as he hopped from foot to foot to keep pace with Mr. Ben, felt in his heart of hearts that his cousin had not changed much either.

Sarah was somewhat dismayed when she found herself kissed on both cheeks by so important-looking a stranger. But the stranger felt himself at home and quite at his ease. If he was unable to restrain a shout of spontaneous merriment on finding the Elisa of his youthful dreams a middle-aged woman, he behaved with a sprightly deference to the women and with a by no means patronising cordiality to the men. Myrtil was obliged to admit that millions, multi-millions, do not necessarily destroy a man's sense of respect.

" The old man is still going strong," Benjamin said to Guillaume, at a moment when they were not overheard, pointing to Myrtil's dictatorial profile. " Solemn as ever, I suppose, and as empty, eh ? That sort of thing lasts for ever. In America, we're a young nation, we like old men. Well, Uncle, are you going to show me over your factory by and by ? There must have been great changes, since the old days. You're the monarchs of all you survey."

" Guillaume will take you over," said the old man, colouring at the other's flattery. " I get tired easily, and there is indeed a great deal to see, if one does not wish to miss anything. Everything has been so improved that old people don't know where they are."

" We shall see about that," thought Mr. Ben, remembering two or three hints that he had picked up on his way from the station.

Justin, who had been detained in the factory until that

moment, and did not entirely resent anything that could advertise the extent of his occupations, now made his appearance.

" Why, here's my old chum of the char-à-bancs ! It was a char-à-bancs, wasn't it, Jos ? But, honest to God, the horse was a fiery stallion, he let us have it straight ! Come here and let me look at you, Master Justin. Good. Here is my hand. You are supposed to shake it. Thank you. You wouldn't care for to play prisoner's base now, out in the wood there ? I'm still game. They say you've become a very smart gentleman. Oh, you old idiot, there was no need to take offence. I've come back to this old place to see the family and rejoice with them that we're still alive. I only know what I have heard said, and I've always had the habit of chattering so as to find things out. But where are all the rest ? "

The little red eyes of the exuberant cousin darted from one to another, and Joseph began to feel once again, as in the good old days, his heart exposed to them in the painful character of a pincushion.

" You haven't seen my children," he said.

" No. Show me them, weaver."

" Laure has gone to fetch them," said Hermine in her colourless voice. Luncheon was served at Guillaume's, where Sarah and Myrtil now lived.

" You haven't got the telephone here ? " asked Benjamin, turning suddenly to Guillaume.

" Not yet, not yet," the other replied with a smile.

" And at the factory ? *Not* at the factory? Oh ! Why not? "

The same mysterious smile creased Myrtil's birthmark.

" If one had to adopt all the inventions . . ."

" Why of course one has to."

" And the cost ? " hissed the patriarch, in his old tone of command.

" But it repays one hundred per cent.—it means life. Ha, here come the young folks."

There followed a regular inspection, the twofold result of which found expression in fatuous remarks made aloud and in mute observations of a more intimate nature.

" Now what is this thing here, first of all ? Oh, the redhead, Father and Mother Stern's darling. Plump cheeks, upon my word. God delivered me from the mother, he will doubtless deliver someone else from the daughter. Oho ! The puss doesn't keep her eyes in her pocket, but she has learned only one part and is acting it all the time. You must vary your play, my girl. Now it's this free citizen's turn. My word, Jos has larded them well. If the firm of Simler and Co. are relying upon you to advance along the way of progress. . . . Not a bad boy, all the same. Why, he even knows how to offer his hand to an older man. As soon as this well-nourished lad has his pocket full of the money his father has earned, the place will begin to take its revenge. Wretched contamination. In that respect, the *Judengasse* and the pedlar's pack were better. Bast ! Their grandsons will be properly plucked by the first Yids from Galicia that come to seek their bread in this quarter, and necessity will polish off all this pinchbeck West. Aha ! Oho ! Frr ! Here's something very different ! Who are these two ? I knew we should be seeing something of this sort. Phah ! My journey has not been in vain."

Laure came joyously in, accompanied by a burst of laughter which stopped short on the threshold of the domestic convent and before the Yankee's gold spectacles.

" May the good God protect my three-and-forty years ! Judith, Ruth and Rebecca, ah, women of my race ! But why were not there any like this when I was twenty-five ? Keep calm, old sinner, let us use our eyes, since that is one of the things we came here to do. My faith, the old Laure who sat winking at me on the char-à-bancs (it was a char-à-bancs, wasn't it ?) gave no reason to expect . . . But who can have extracted the diamond from its bed ? Could it be this young

gentleman with the flashing, rather sugary eyes—master Louis, I suppose—who is hypocritically struggling to conceal the vitality that is oozing out of him at every pore ? My boy, hypocrisy is a good thing, but not too much of it. I bet that you spend your time conscientiously denying the world as it is revealed to you. That is very wise. It is just as well, however, that you should not waste too much time over that necessary but sterile exercise. Besides, there is more languor than I care to see, at the corners of your long eyes. You look pretty washed-out for fourteen. But I shall come back to you later, my young friend. Let your uneasy eyes gaze their fill ; for the moment I am going to make polite speeches to all these old family portraits, as well as to the young lady with whom you were laughing so merrily, on the other side of that door. For she is the only person in the room, except myself, whom your presence does not transform into a chromo in two dimensions.—Hallo, Elisa, your children are splendid. And these gherkins, Hermine, these gherkins ! It is seventeen years since I felt a pickled gherkin melt in my mouth, except on one occasion, in a *Gar-Küche* in Chicago where the forks and spoons (you were allowed to use your own jack-knife) were fastened to the table by little chains, in view of the incomparable quality of the metal. The *Gar-Küche* still exists. I must have you all to dine there when you come over to return my visit. For I count on your coming. For one thing, you aren't going to allow the Germans to go on inundating the place any longer. There's work there for ten big boys like you, Charlie. As for Justin, I guess that to take a breather over there for six months wouldn't do him any harm. I shall take you back with me, if you like, you'll find you'll double your business in five years. But we can talk about all that another time. Aunt Sarah, I've brought you a big shawl of Massachusetts wool. If you keep on refusing to grow any older, people will say when they see us go by together :—Look, they're father and daughter ! "

The sixty million dollars with which common report credited Benjamin made these speeches ring pleasantly in the ear. The men were slightly vexed at not being taken seriously enough, or rather at receiving that impression. As for Sarah and Myrtil, this nephew awakened in them such a host of memories, that they smiled to see their own young days brought back again, and his cordiality refreshed and invigorated the oldest phantoms.

" He has exactly his grandfather's voice. Do you remember him ? Mina's father, Ludwig, little Ludwig from Dannemarie. Ach, good gracious, I seem to see him now, dancing with my sister Palmyre, on my wedding-day. Aha ! "

A flood of tears streamed from the aged eyelids, searing them like molten lava. Each of them bent his head for a moment over his plate to allow the spectres of the absent the time to vanish. Then the genealogies rose again to the surface, and Alsace intertwined with Lorraine, the Sarre and the Comtat in multiple and immemorial wedlock.

" And Aunt Babette, I haven't seen her," cried Benjamin, as he suddenly put down his coffee-cup. " Aunt Babette, Uncle Wilhelm, what has become of them ? "

" Babette has long been confined to the house, and never leaves her chair," Sarah replied, shaking her head.

" Oh, poor soul ! " said Benjamin. " I must run and say how d'ye do to her. Does she still live at that place . . . what is it called . . . in that little dark cellar ? And the uncle, how is he keeping ? "

" You . . . humph ! You will see him at the factory," said Myrtil with a certain stiffness which might be due to embarrassment.

There was not a moment to be lost ; this impetuous cousin must be escorted to the house on the plain of Saint-Simplicien.

" It is nice of you to remember the old and helpless," said Babette in her shrill, musical voice. Dropsy kept her tied to her chair, and her doll-like face smiled a friendly welcome.

" What a fine gentleman you have grown ! Where is the little Benjamin of long ago, who used to play with poor Lambert in our little yard outside Colmar, in holiday-time ? Do you still remember our little house in Alsace, Benjamin ? So many things have happened since then, and it all seems so very far away now ! "

" Aunt Babette, here is a trinket that the savages make in the place where I live. I thought it might amuse you."

It was a curious buckle of enamelled silver, carefully chosen so as to dispel any idea of humiliating generosity.

" Thank you, my dear Benjamin. You were always a good boy. Come nearer and let me kiss you. I'm not very active on my feet now, you know. Other people have to put themselves out for me now."

" This is an aspect of the question which certainly does not suggest opulence. Why the devil did they all cringe like whipped dogs, at the *tantele's* ? " Benjamin said to himself, as he towed the male Simlers back towards the factory at lightning speed.

Jos, who had undergone sufficient strain for one day, went and shut himself up in the warehouse. Justin found the most excellent reason for absenting himself, and Myrtil waved his hand in farewell, as a servant pushed him in his wheeled chair into the weaving-rooms.

So that Guillaume had to serve alone as target, during the next four hours, to a running fire of questions. Although he allowed quite three out of five to pass unheeded, from sheer inability to answer them, he heard quite enough to make him feel thoroughly exhausted. Whereupon Benjamin ceased his operations.

" So this is the famous factory ? " muttered the cousin, while his round-toed shoes, his gold spectacles and his coat with its brown check, cut full in the English style, aroused general curiosity. " Humph ! Not kept very tidy, the famous factory, I don't believe they have a gang of scrubbers in the

place, or sweepers. Rasch ! " (They passed into the carding-room.) " You could coat all the sheep in Australia with the fluff that's floating in the air here. Healthy, for those who have to swallow it morning, noon and night, I suppose. It must give a fine lining to your lungs and throat. This floor has never heard of such a thing as a mop. You can't see an inch before your nose at three o'clock on a June afternoon ; what must it be like in January ? No use, I suppose, my saying anything to him about electric light. He would fall down in a fit. I must make some inquiries, though. Tell me, Will, when you move stuff from one floor or one building to another . . ."

" Yes. What about it ? "

" I mean to say, do you do it all by hand ? "

" Why, of course."

" Ah ! And you are certain that it wouldn't be a saving of time and labour to . . . to do it differently, by some mechanical process, for instance ? "

" Mechanical ? "

" I am thinking of elevators, endless bands, or spiral rods."

Guillaume shrugged his shoulders : " What would be the use ? If we were building a new factory, I don't say. But it has grown up bit by bit, and things are not going badly as they are."

" Divine Justice," sighed Benjamin, " these are the people who for ten years were at the head of progress. Their very improvements have drifted into routine. Acrr ! " he gave a sudden shout, as he clutched his hat which was being swept off his head by a driving band, " so your transmission is not protected ! Have you many accidents ? "

" A few of them get caught at times," said Guillaume with an unfeigned commiseration. " But what is one to do ? "

" Of course, what is one to do ? And I bet that among the three thousand unwashed, consumptive, panic-stricken galley slaves who work here, there are not thirty capable of washing

their hands, putting on frock-coats and coming and saying to their employers : ' We have come as a deputation from the *Union* of your workers, to come to an understanding with you about the conditions of our labour. We demand . . . ' Show me the dressing-rooms and lavatories," he asked Wilhelm suddenly.

" The dress . . . There aren't any."

" Nor shower-baths, I suppose, any more than you have sweepers in the courtyards. What are those fellows doing scratching the cloth, and those others flogging at it ? "

" That is the velvet dressing. Would you like to watch ? "

" Thanks, thanks. I have seen it, or something like it, in the Sudanese village at the Exposition, if I'm not mistaken."

The infernal din of the looms prevented Guillaume from grasping the point of this interesting comparison.

" How many generators have you ?—engines ? " he corrected himself seeing that Guillaume did not understand him.

" Seven."

" Seven ? Good God in Heaven ! Why, you must be wasting seven times as much as you're worth in coal and energy ! What's to prevent you from putting up a central power station ? It will cost you eighty thousand dollars, but you will save five thousand dollars a year. I am beginning to get an idea of what the factories must have been like that have gone under ! You will do well to lavish your generosity upon your customs officials. For evidently money shows no reluctance to let itself be made, in France."

He decided, in consequence of this, to postpone until some more suitable time the quite simple questions which he had prepared as to the effective power absorbed per loom-hour, the amount lost in transmission of energy, the underlying reasons that had determined the placing of the different departments, and the financial system that had been responsible for the building of the workers' dwellings. Having actually caught a glimpse, beneath his spectacles, of some

filthy little note-books which could only be registers of pay, he dismissed from the field of his curiosity everything that concerned the organisation of labour, the workers' club and the co-operative restaurant.

These reflections were, perhaps, lacking in generosity. There had, after all, been a considerable advance from the little cloth-mill among the Alsatian chestnut-trees. But Mr. Ben had cultivated, under other skies, a certain ideal of industrial and human decency, which the good old routine no longer satisfied.

" Astonishing how dingy the place has become. What is called instinctive mimicry, I suppose."

He shot a glance at his guide.

" Humph ! They've grown old devilish quick in this place, and poor Will here more than any of them, I can see it now. I really must stop persecuting him by appearing shocked. What is the matter with him ? Tell me, Will (I think I can mention this), have your workers formed a Union ? "

Once again he translated his word, to cover the weaver's ignorance :

" A Syndicate ? "

By Guillaume's terrified expression, he guessed that he had put his foot in a wasps' nest.

" Aha ! . . . Strikes ? "

Guillaume made no reply, but the rest of the inspection gave evidence of the haste with which he seemed to be impelled to rid himself of a burden.

They had been on the move for four hours, nevertheless, and without seeing everything, when an anxious and harassed man flung himself down upon his revolving chair, the sole emblem of proprietorial dignity in a little closet opening off the spinning-room.

And, all of a sudden, the self-satisfied, unlistening guide

of a moment earlier returned abruptly to the questions which he had evaded during the tour.

" Yes, Benjamin, yes, there was a Syndicate. Immediately after that dreadful law was passed in '84 ! Our workers, whom we had treated like our own children, whom we addressed by their names, with whom we shared our work and our anxieties, whom we used to visit, whom we helped in times of trouble, they had no sooner seen the door of ingratitude forced open. . . . In the autumn of '85, in the height of the busy season, they sent delegates, without warning us, laid down terms, asked to see our books—they, six poor devils who would never have dared to raise their voices, had not a smooth-tongued mechanic whom we had just taken on, held the floor and repeated all the patter of the agitators from Paris. Always the same old game, don't you know ? "

And what then ? Their legitimate demands had been granted, and at once they had cried victory, speechified at public meetings and drawn up a list of preposterous claims. Work had ceased. The Simler looms had been silent, for the first time since the War. Guillaume used to recognise his own workers, in the street, during those three weeks, by the fact of their being the only ones who did not touch their caps to him. But, to keep themselves from doing so, they had to clench their fists tightly in their pockets. And, four days after the beginning of the strike, they began to come, as soon as it was dark, to ring the bell at the back door and ask for bread, accepting reproaches and rebukes with a ten-sou piece.

Thereupon he, Guillaume, had wished to give up the whole business, and Myrtil, dismayed by this unforeseen aspect of the catastrophe, announced that they would have to liquidate and that his nephews must become stock-brokers. But for Joseph, but for Justin most of all (at this a sudden stiffening of his body), who could tell what would

have happened? Three weeks later, the Syndicate capitulated. Masters and workers set the factory going again, with their tails between their legs.

Would Benjamin kindly say whether this was adequate reward for a life of toil? And whether it was really necessary to barter the pleasant patriarchal system of the past for this all-invading modernity?

As though this had not sufficed, two years later, only last year, in fact, in the full swing of orders for the Exposition, fresh injunctions. The Syndicate had won, by devious channels. Self-confident and stupid, the Simlers had stopped their ears to every warning. A delegation, headed by a strange gentleman, with white hands and a derby hat, had laid a sheet of paper upon the table and withdrawn, without uttering a word, with a stupefying air of sarcasm. Joseph had run out after them and had flung the scraps of their paper in their faces. The children had had to be kept indoors. The street became insolent. The Simlers had moved their beds into the factory, with a picket of Alsatian foremen; and finally a company of infantry had shown the flash of their bayonets through the railings. Even if the damage was confined to a few broken panes and some shouting, did Benjamin think that things were any better to-day, when Guillaume felt himself a stranger in his own factory, intercepted glances that froze a tender heart like his, and woke with a start, in the middle of the night, at the least flash of light reflected on his windows?

Yes, let Benjamin say whether such behaviour was in the interest of all parties concerned.

But Benjamin inquired the salaries of the workers, and, having noted them down in a little pocket-book, drew conclusions from them which he took care not to communicate to his cousin. Then Ben inquired what had happened to the ringleaders of the movement, after the two strikes were ended. Having learned that they had been, as was right and

proper, given notice at the earliest opportunity, he sucked his pencil with an impenetrable air, and began to study the plinth of the walls.

Whereupon Guillaume, spurred to vehemence, added that the recruiting of three thousand workers was becoming the threatening point. How were they to assure themselves against the elements of disorder and preserve among their staff that family unity which was the joy and comfort of the old system of working? Ah, who would bring back Alsace, its domestic workrooms, the easy authority of the good rich over the trusting poor? All the pleasure went out of profits that were laboriously acquired. The worker did as little as he could for his money, he despised his trade, and the joyous harmony of all parties was destroyed for ever in the thraldom of modern industry.

Thus there appeared, before the startled eyes of Mr. Ben, and before his face which was puckered with the strain of listening, a bitter image of industry, masters adrift upon an ocean of ill-will and jealousy, reduced to the part of castaways, feeling their powerlessness increase as each fresh wave carried them to its crest.

Had Benjamin seen this factory, which four hours' continuous walking was not sufficient to cover? Which was doing business to the tune of fourteen millions, with an increase of one million annually? Did he suspect that each of these millions was an addition to the weight of an enormous burden upon their shoulders?

Who could breathe freely, once he was shut up within these fatal walls? What was a man worth, compared with that mass in motion? Within twenty hours of the burial of their father, the looms had been restarted, and Sarah had cried shame. But is the traffic on a railway stopped because a man has fallen under the wheels of a train? Were they not fated to fall in the same way, with full steam ahead, one after the other? And when it was the last Simler's turn

to disappear, does Ben suppose that, even then, the factory could be casually stopped? Will not the State, one fine day, add to all its previous usurpations the right to dictate to the manufacturer the amount of his output, his sales, his profits, regulating the workers' hours of rest and destroying the employer's rest for all time?

Work or perish! Work even after you have perished, through your sons, through your heirs, through the active force of your name. . . .

It was at this point that Ben interrupted him with: "Why are you tormenting yourself? You can retire whenever you choose: you have a son and nephews. . . ."

But speech failed him as soon as he noticed the surprising effect produced by this remark. Guillaume at once became silent and sank into a bitter meditation, swinging one leg across the knee of the other.

Then, at the solemn stroke of five, he rose and, without looking at his cousin, said: "This is the time when we meet in the warehouse. Would you care to come?"

At the foot of the stair, a bent back, a careening gait, and a furtive glance reminded Ben of something: "Uncle Wilhelm!" he exclaimed. The clubfoot, who had been waiting all day for this meeting, turned round and flung his arms apart:

"My Benjamin, my little Benjamin!"

Ben clasped him to his bosom.

"What are you doing here, Uncle Wilhelm?"

"I do odd jobs, you see, odd jobs," said the uncle, shifting his feet, and trying to conceal a hammer behind his back.

"His pocket is full of nails, his back is covered with sawdust, and his hands are all chapped. They put the poor old man on to make packing cases."

Firmly planted on their feet, at the door of the warehouse, Joseph and Justin were spectators of this scene.

When Ben came within earshot, Justin looked him straight in the face, and said, in excellent English :

" You may perhaps have imagined certain things, and I don't care if you have. We have offered a dozen times to let him retire, with a handsome pension, and he always refuses."

" Oh ! Noble hearts ! "

" Perhaps you don't believe me ? "

" I believe," replied Ben as he gripped the other's arm above the elbow and wrinkled his own face behind his spectacles, " I believe that you have conveyed to me all the truth that is capable of remaining in you. You speak quite good English, by the way, with a Yorkshire accent, of which you will perhaps have to get rid."

When Myrtil's wheeled chair had been pushed into the room by the servant, the family council was complete, and Mr. Ben had a full hour in which to give a final polish to his remarks. His pencil indulged, during the course of their discussion, in a discreet little task of its own, which Simler junior sought in vain to overlook.

When everybody had left the room, Justin returned, struck a match, and was furious at the other's vandalism : from the printed heading of every sheet of notepaper in the rack, the cousin had struck out the name Simler, and reduced the style of the firm to a mere, absurd, enigmatic—

" — *& Co.*"

II

On the following day, as he came out of school, Louis had the surprise of seeing his schoolfellows gaping at a Yankee with gold spectacles, who was absorbed in an animated conversation with the head.

The Yankee gave Louis an imperceptible signal which absolved the latter from the necessity of appearing to have

anything in common with the phenomenon. Then, the phenomenon made the head introduce him to the second master, who appeared greatly surprised.

Louis waited, uneasy and furious, in the purlieus of the *bazaar*. Finally, Benjamin emerged. He took leave ceremoniously of the prof., seized his cousin by the arm and led him away without uttering a word.

As soon as they had reached the open country, he broke the silence :

" First of all, I have to apologise for having meddled in your affairs."

The English *you* came as a shock to Louis, who had not expected it.

" But I am only passing through, there was something I wanted to know, I had no other way of finding it out. I shall be glad when you tell me that you bear me no ill will.

" I regret that I have to inform you, continuing to tread upon your private domain, that your head and your form-master are not unreservedly pleased with you. You are : capricious, irregular, absent-minded, often inattentive, and you work only at the subjects that suit you. Your head declares that you are infinitely less brilliant than Justin, and he has not the same confidence in your future."

Benjamin broke off his speech at this point and darted a glance at his listener. He saw only a hard sneering face upon which anger had painted two great livid patches. He went on quietly :

" But my own opinion is that your head and your form-master are a pair of old idiots."

Apart from a twitching of the eyebrows, no change could be detected on Louis's features. As though encouraged by the result of his scrutiny, Benjamin went on :

" It is not with the object of repeating this tittle-tattle that I am taking this walk in your company. I have to

talk to you about something infinitely more serious. . . . Laure."

Louis raised his head quickly. Benjamin was emphatic : " Yes, about Laure. She is two-and-twenty, she is not married, she shows no inclination to marry. I consider that you are largely responsible for this state of things."

Louis came to a standstill : " I, responsible ? "

" Tut ! You will understand what I mean in a moment. You are doubtless not unaware that your cousin has refused two or three proposals of marriage ? "

Louis nodded his head in assent.

" All right. These proposals did not appeal to her nature, I suppose ? "

Another nod.

" Yes. Very well, it is your fault. No use protesting. And don't run away from me, either. I have very little time, I am only passing through, that is why I am forced to be slightly brutal, if, that is to say, the subject is of any interest to you."

Then, as he saw the young man step out again by his side :

" My friend, the first rule of conduct, in this world, in order to diminish as far as possible the harm that we are capable of doing, is to know exactly what we are and of what we are capable. You will remain useless to yourself and dangerous to other people, so long as you persist in ignoring what is at present the one thing that it is essential for you to know : that is to say, that you are a force. Yes, yes, my dear boy, and the only force that exists, for the moment, in the house of Simler. However, you know that already."

Louis had turned a deep crimson, and his ears burned as though they were being torn from his head.

" You acquiesce," the Yankee went on, with a certain tremor in his voice, " you cannot do otherwise without

disparaging yourself in a wretched fashion. My dear boy, there are, among our people—I mean the Jews—two currents. They have often mingled without amalgamating. They are in any case mutually antagonistic. You belong to one, the rest of the Simlers who are now alive belong to the other. There have been Simlers, in the past, not to mention Blums, and Sterns, and Lévis and Haases, who, in their little communities, have been of your sort. That is why you are what you are, and why there will always be others in every generation. You know *exactly* what I mean."

For the tenth time, the nature of Louis's silence changed, and gave Benjamin the answer that he expected.

"I am not going to make any prophecies about your future, as your grandmother would do or your headmaster, first of all because it is your own affair, and secondly because we shall come back to it in a moment. Well, then, being what you are, that is to say of the sort which, for want of a better word, I shall call—hum! I shall not call by any name, but of the sort which, in a word, makes it an honour to be a Jew, you have attracted to yourself a nature which was more uncertain, but which asked only to be allowed to develop. Do not protest. I mean Laure. I do not say that she is in love with you, or that you are in love with her. If you don't object, we can leave all that sort of nonsense out of account. She is a warm-hearted, wholesome girl of two-and-twenty, and you are a gentleman of fourteen. But you have influenced her. She has sought—*sought*, do you understand? And she has not found a husband."

A lump that had stuck in his throat was suffocating Louis. Benjamin did not appear to notice this. He continued:

"This situation puts you under an obligation. No privilege without a relative and proportionate responsibility, you understand. Woman's function is to unite herself to man, to bear children, to bring them up and feed them. Do not

deduce from this the man's part ; you would do it by a process of reasoning, and it is still a little complicated for the fourteen-year-old structure of your bodily frame. Try, then, to escape as soon as possible from an environment in which you will meet nobody who has not made it his object in life to get rich as quickly and as sordidly as possible."

So far, Benjamin had only once heard the sound of his cousin's voice, but he did not seem to mind.

" The direction that you choose matters little—or rather it matters only to yourself. You may become an artisan, or hawk newspapers, in which I should see no harm—since that is not the question—but which might set you wrong at the very start, and increase your difficulty in getting under way. For it is a remarkable thing that, in this damned country, it is easier for a boy from the classical side to become President of the Court of Appeal than to get a job as crossing-sweeper. But if I hark back to what your master told me, I am led to suppose that you have a distinct talent for philology. It is a fine subject. Jews are generally good at it. I have heard also of your taste for the violin. You have got together quite a collection of minerals which must have brought you plenty of ridicule. Your private preferences extend doubtless to other things as well. I do not ask to know them. The sole practical purpose of my sermon—one must always have a practical purpose when one starts preaching —is to inform you that, if you encounter the slightest difficulty in the quest of your true career, you can always reckon upon me. If, for instance, you should one day feel a desire to go and study in America, where we are sounder upon quite a number of questions than you good Europeans imagine, I shall do whatever is necessary with regard to your parents and yourself. I tell you all this, because they consider that three Simlers will not be too many in this hole, —which is quite true, from their point of view. In consequence of which I know that they intend to keep you here

at any cost, and that it must not happen at any cost, you understand me, Louis, at any cost ! "

The note of authority in his voice having stiffened the boy's face afresh, Benjamin laid his hand on his shoulder :

" I have made inquiries. I have looked around me. Outwardly, everything is irreproachable. But the buildings are wormeaten. They are leaking at every pore. Your father and uncles will live and die without the slightest suspicion, you may be sure of that. But the younger generation will no sooner be at the helm than the ship will sink, my dear boy, body and soul, unless the crew should take the heroic decision to get rid of the staff, a decision of which I suppose them to be quite incapable. Well, not only does all this business not concern you in any respect, but you have already contracted quite sufficient obligations, in other fields, as I have had the honour of informing you."

Louis was scarcely breathing. Just as he raised his head, possibly to speak, Benjamin stopped him with a wave of his hand and proceeded :

" I beg your pardon, I had forgotten : when I told you that you might reckon upon me—I should have said, except for money. That again ought to reassure you. No one here shall ever see the colour of my money. My friend, when I saw that the house of Stern was making its pile, I took my hook. But when I found that, over there, instead of making my pile, I was simply becoming a very rich man, I said to myself : ' Steady, my boy ; think what you are doing.' It was then that I made myself an American citizen. My father had all that he needed. I saw to that too, you understand. But the rest was not to be allowed to fall into men's hands. Money scorches them, they are never any use afterwards for work. With your cursed French law, there was no way of preventing this. Everything that I shall leave when I die is divided already into two portions. One is going to

an Institute of Philosophy, experimental and otherwise—you have nothing of the sort here, with your highfalutin metaphysics. It is in America. If you would care to come and see it some day, you would not be wasting your time. The other half is earmarked for Pasteur, for his Institute, in Paris ; for there is nothing like it in the world. And works of that sort are more important than the individual, don't you agree ? "

It was Louis's turn now to speak, in a voice that at first was hoarse and broken.

" I think . . . I consider that there was no harm in your talking to those old fogies in the hole. As for what you said about Laure, I should like to feel that you were mistaken, I . . . I shall investigate. As for myself, what you have said interests me. But I should like to know first of all what has led you to that opinion of the factory . . . and the family which . . . yes."

" Aha. This is where we come to the critical point. *Culmen, discrimen*, as old Glotz used to say in the school at Schlestadt. You are a Frenchman, a bourgeois, and a Jew. Other people have to solve an equation of two degrees ; in ours, there are three. Shall we examine them together ? Frenchman and bourgeois, all right. Frenchman and Jew, I see less difficulty than in any other combination of that sort. As for Jew and bourgeois . . .

" You were asking, were you not, what it was that had led me to form an opinion of the factory and of the family which does not, really, surprise you, does it ? It is because I have seen, in the past, a species of Simler entirely different from those who gave you life and are seeking so honourably to deprive you of it : I mean the Simlers of Alsace, that is to say, men of the people who might have been taken for aristocrats. You follow me ? Strength, means, habits, an honesty that were plebeian, and the mentality, the civilisation of aristocrats. You do not remember your grandfather

However, it would have been too late. It was back there that you ought to have known him.

" When I left France, I had a poor opinion of Uncle Hippolyte ; I said to myself : There is a man for whom there is nothing but facts, and those only the facts of his own life. But since then, I have seen so many men of his type, that I have come to understand them : facts, to him, were only an outward appearance. He did not really live surrounded by facts, he transformed them first of all into ideas, and it was only then that he began to act, along a straight line, like a true idealist. He made cloth like a Cabbalist doctor, and not like a weaver. That is a great difference, my dear Louis, and a sign of great strength. He accomplished something far more difficult than going and establishing himself straight off in the ideal with his years at the University, his *Encyclopædia Britannica*, his ' comfort,' and touring about in it in an easy chair, with a rug over his feet, peeling oranges, as one goes across the Rockies in a Pullman. But there is this to be borne in mind; Hippolyte is dead, and you others have sold the sword to pay for gilding the scabbard."

Louis was one of those people who do not make a point of calling attention to the fact that they have understood what is being said to them. He decided that what Ben might still have to say would be more novel to himself than the reply that was expected of him, and continued to walk by his cousin's side in silence. Ben seemed delighted.

" I shall not assume you to be more of a fool than you are. You understand exactly what I mean. However, with your permission, I have two or three little considerations to add on my own account. Here, you have an old and fine country in which people have settled down to live upon the remains of something great. These people, you follow me, are the children of clerks or peasants who imagine themselves to be powers sprung from the remotest past because

they have bought slices of parks or wings of castles, and make other people work hard for low wages. The difficulty was not how to outstrip them, but how to outstrip them without ceasing to be yourselves, without becoming mere rich people, like all the parvenus in the world. When one is the senior labourer and the premier aristocrat in the whole of the earth, one does not permit oneself to decline. And as the bourgeois of this country has after all something on his side which you lack, the habit of living among people of his civilisation (an old and fine civilisation), his religion, his customs, his speech, you are, compared with him, merely sham bourgeois, bourgeois reduced and made ridiculous, of whom they are quite right to make fun and you to feel ashamed."

Here Ben burst out laughing : " That reminds me that I let myself be tempted, yesterday, in their office, to indulge in a little joke of which I have no reason to feel proud. My dear boy, if it should so happen that anything which I have said makes it the least bit difficult for you to honour your father and mother, forget it. But I do not believe that it will. Honour your father and mother, honour the name of Simler. In fact, it is too late now to honour it, the time has come to save it.

" You know of course what is printed upon the office paper, eh ? Two terms, two forces : first of all *Simler*, good —and then the *Company*. In the first beginning, there was *Simler*—alone, like God. And then *Simler* grew, and, conscious of his solitude, like God, he created the *Company*, as God created the world. Then, the *Company* grew also. And there happened to Simler what happens to all people who found businesses, the business devours the man, '— *& Co.*' is devouring *Simler*, and if you don't take great care, you yourself, I mean, there will be no *Simler* left. You understand ? Nothing left at all."

Louis had stopped short and was gazing at Ben :

" Would you be so kind as to tell me what exactly is implied, to your mind, by that . . . by the *Company* ? "

" Why, of course, your curiosity is entitled to be set at rest. Two men erect, at a great expense of energy and strength, a cairn of big stones. The cairn grows, rises above them, towers over them. And as they have no other idea in their minds than that of erecting a big cairn, the biggest cairn in existence, they do not waste time either in choosing their stones, or in shaping them, or in binding them with mortar. With the result that, at a given moment, when the wind rises, the pile begins to totter. They hasten to prop it with their arms. But what can they do ? The wind becomes stronger and stronger. If they let go, before they have run a yard, the whole pile will have crashed upon them. And there they are asking themselves to what form of death they are doomed, to run away and be crushed, or to stay where they are and perish of inanition and exhaustion.

" The devil is carrying me away, you have excited my brain. I believe that I have just delivered myself of a parable. Our world has painfully created something that is stronger than itself. The cairn is that something, and besides, what people forget when they think of their business, which is their employees, the employees' wives, their children, their dependants, their lodgers, the people who sell them spirits, their pawnbrokers, and the railways, steamers, employees on railways, in steamers, in mines, and besides, there is . . . there is this, my boy."

Thrusting his hand into his pocket, Ben produced a handful of small change :

" This is what it is, the *Company*."

He added in an important tone : " There is the whole history of modern society in my parable."

" A cheerful story. How are we going to get out of it?"

" That does not concern either you or me. Let us carry

on with our jobs. It will concern the workers when their minds get to work. You must begin by getting clear of it all."

"I? And how?"

"You. Simply by carrying on with your job."

"Which is . . ."

"To throw away the scabbard and take up the sword."

"Against?"

"Against anyone who tries to oppose your becoming yourself again."

"And who will that be?"

"Who should it be, but all those who are urgently interested in doing so?"

Louis remained silent. Then he went on:

"I must confess that I do not yet understand."

"That is quite all right. The fault lies not in your intelligence but in your modesty."

After a silence, thick and tense as a cable, Benjamin continued in a lowered but impressive tone:

"I have seen the new world, the United States, the Grand Canyon, I have marked my own trail and crossed several millions of others. I have travelled from Colorado to New England. I have been terrified a score of times at its bigness and amazed at its unity. I have rubbed shoulders with the citizen of yesterday, the citizen of twenty years ago, and the citizen of last century. Beneath their various jargons I have seen that America had set her mark upon them all, and had made them, by the same token, her sons and servants. I have learned there the law of the maximum output achieved with the minimum outlay, of an ordered, feverish activity, of the coördination of everyone in the struggle of all against all. America is a great and noble country.

"And then I returned to this ancient land which I had forsaken and in which you had meanwhile been born. Ah, my dear boy, this is the country that we love, this is the

country which we feel ourselves bound to serve. Your railways are in a bad way, your factories are out of date, your statesmen are third rate, your policy thinks of nothing, at home or abroad, but the oppression of one man by another. So much for what I have seen for myself, in the first week. But all that is only the envelope, and we must strip it off. I have gone in search of the realities where they used to be found. They were still there, Louis, and, with them, any number of others that used not to be there, twenty years ago, or else I was incapable of noticing them. And when I thought of it again, America was no more than a confusion without an idea, without a direction, without inherited traditions, without beauty, a giant mosquito buzzing round an old white ox.

" Listen : America is quite as much in need of you Frenchmen as you are of her. What she has to learn from you will take her a century. What she has to teach you, in industry and in business, can be learned in ten years, as soon as the people here take to studying it. Is this a task of such paramount importance that the Simlers, all the Simlers in France, ought to sacrifice to it what elements they possess of eternal force ? "

" You speak lightly," said Louis bitterly. " My people were not doing nothing, when they left Buschendorf."

" It is not a question of not doing nothing, one has to do everything, when one is a . . . a Simler. Did they come away from Buschendorf to serve their country, or to become corrupted in it ? "

" I think they did . . . practically everything in their power to serve."

" They ought to have proceeded straight ahead, instead of stopping by the roadside, to shake the pagoda-tree with the local dandies, and learn to argue after their fashion."

"According to you, we ought to have remained Germans ? "

" No. But it is not worth while to pluck your right hand from the flame, if you allow the left to be scorched. You know what I mean."

" Yes."

" I do not, however, consider that the . . . that our people have been altogether valueless to this country. It may even be that they were essential to it. We shall find out some day, and many other things at the same time. But for the present, *basta* ! You can't see everything. Vendeuvre is only one aspect of the question. The Simlers are only another. I have just been travelling through your North, your East. There are some curious discoveries to be made there. And even here, this profound and intimate civilisation, which does not ever die, which is asleep perhaps . . .

" You are not old enough yet to understand this. One of your family, according to what I hear, did, one day, approach that ancient civilisation, but his courage failed him. However that may be, I prophesy that, within twenty years from now, this ancient land will have shaken off its slumber and will find itself, if it chooses, in commerce and in thought, one of the youngest in the world. It will perhaps have attained its salvation through you. You, in turn, may attain your salvation through it."

In the mind of anyone who had been present at this conversation, Louis would have seemed to be animated by an ineradicable hostility to his cousin. But Ben was not unaware of the effect produced upon a nature accustomed to long cloistral meanderings by a first buffet of fresh air. He betrayed no resentment, and continued, not however without a certain quickening of his tone, to the end. It was growing late, and he was beginning to feel—partly because it seemed so absurd, and also because his throat was becoming hoarse—that he had been talking for a long time without leaving the core of the subject.

" So Papa is to distribute his wealth among the poor, and

we are to put on white shirts and stand in the Place d'Armes making a public confession of our sins ? "

" It would be a charming ceremony to watch, but would, I fear, do no good to anyone. The money that is distributed among the poor has never helped to make them any less poor. The touch of the white shirt shows that you have imagination, which I never suspected.

" But why should you not make a similar procession through your own hearts ? It is a long time since any of you has set foot on that ground. It must have become devilish deserted. You know what I mean, that part in which there lies the profound reason for what makes us endure among the races of mankind—the professions call it *our mission*, which is not a particularly enlightening explanation. There are more profitable discoveries to be made there than you imagine. Shut yourselves up in yourselves for a year or two. Become hermit-like once again. No country has ever conceived any great thoughts except in the minds of its hermits. It is not by being like other people that one serves them, but by differing from them. A country needs to have its dissenters just as much as its conformists. Recover the purposes of your sojourn upon earth, Louis, recapture the personal notion of what is meant by your mind. If you must break with your family, break. When we have to save a drowning man without letting him drown us, we begin by stunning him with a blow on the head. As for popular opinion, you may imagine that it will not facilitate your escape, since it is all too well aware that a man who sets himself free is an axis round which everything will turn. There may be a certain amount of opposition. . . . "

Here, Ben gripped Louis's right arm in his fingers, and, before the other could free himself, felt his muscles for a moment.

" . . . Develop your fists, free man ! "

Louis released himself, not too roughly, however :

" And Laure, in all this business, is she to develop her fists, free woman ? "

Ben began to laugh. Louis, who had nourished a vague hope of wounding him, felt slightly disappointed.

" You blaze the trail, she will follow. And once you have both overcome the opposition, we have no further say in the matter, which concerns only herself and destiny. You will have paid your debt."

Straying from one path to another, and walking without any goal, they had come to the great battlemented rock which overhung the railway tunnel, the whole extent of the plain, and Vendeuvre, pinned to its cliffs by the silver lance of its canal. A May sun was sparkling joyously over the panorama. The smoke of Vendeuvre rose in the atmosphere like a violet shawl. A diffused sound spread like seed scattered from the sower's hand. Every voice was represented in it, from that of the insect boring the dead branch at their feet, to that of a lonely dog, whose barking sounded from a farm a league away. A train crossed the canal and the metal viaduct uttered its sound. The five Simler factories seemed to be seized by a frenzy of activity, a muddy stream belched from their chimneys, a more sharply defined tumult passed, like an affirmation, through the fog of sounds, and rose to where the man and boy were standing.

" You seem to know everything," said Louis in a voice that would not acknowledge defeat. " Is *my mission* to destroy all that or to preserve it ? On the employer's side, or on the worker's ? "

" Once again, that does not concern me. On the side of justice. It is for you to decide what proportion of right there is on one side and the other. If you arrive at a conclusion before the day of your death, you will be able to boast that you have rendered no mean service to your fellow-men. In case you do not

arrive at it, I give you the answer now : on the side of suffering."

Louis allowed his school satchel, which he had been carrying and which had been bothering him all this time, to slip to the ground between his feet. He undid the top button of his jacket, drew out a pocket-book of patent leather, and from this extracted a sheet of paper which he handed to Ben without saying a word.

It was the sheet which Justin had covered with his laconic inscriptions, the day on which he had made his decision. Louis had discovered it, and had kept it, meaning to play a joke on his cousin. It is to be supposed that he had found it, as time went on, food for reflections of a different sort, for the sheet was worn, crumpled, like a document that has often been unfolded.

The boy studied Benjamin's rubicund face as he mastered the contents of the strange document. Then, without looking, he laid his finger upon the spot where, coupled with the name of Hélène Le Pleynier, appeared that of his father.

" And he, Ben, did he find, that day, the purpose of his mission ? "

Ben seemed worried : " I did not suppose that that episode would have come to your knowledge. Here, Louis, *I know absolutely nothing.* And how could anyone know ? Honour thy father and mother. If Joseph had not married Elisa, would you be in the world ? That is all that you need consider. You have no judgment to pronounce upon it. Joseph is the man of whom I was speaking, who came near, one day, to that ancient civilisation. Who can say whether that is not what has made you what you are ? Go ahead, never do anything that may place you in the path of anyone else, and take care to keep the way clear in front of you. At the same time . . . if *she* is not dead, and if you ever happen to meet *her*, ask her . . . ask her for her blessing. She will never refuse it to you. As all life must pass

through woman in order to perpetuate itself, so women know something more than we know, in the realm of things obscure."

A silence followed,—the last in this conversation.

" Meanwhile, if I were you, I should not carry that mortification about in my bosom any longer. Let the past destroy itself. Judge not. Act. Your actions contain the one sanction that is of any value. Your actions shall be the judgment passed on your judgments."

Louis said nothing, but took the document from Ben's hands. The pulp of the paper had been worn so thin that a mere twitch of his thumb was sufficient to reduce it to dust. A sort of grey fluff floated for a moment before their eyes ; then a light breeze from the east caught it, and the flakes drifted away, one by one, to lose themselves over Vendeuvre, whose long roofs were quivering in the May sun, as though moved by the strain of some internal agony.